

Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD) Preliminary Decennial Review Report



By: Eric Hill, Survey Director, and
Charles Sullivan, Executive Director
Cambridge Historical Commission
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Commissioners:

Marie-Pierre Dillenseger, Chair; Aaron Kemp, Vice Chair.

Ruby Booz, Peter Schur, Jo Solet, Members; Donna Marcantonio, James Van Sickle,
Alternates.

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Executive Summary:

Neighborhood Conservation Districts have been created in Cambridge to conserve the fabric of architecturally and historically significant communities. The districts recognize the particular historic and architectural qualities of neighborhoods and buildings and encourage their protection and maintenance for the benefit of the entire City. NCD commissions accomplish this by reviewing applications for building permits for new construction, demolition, and alterations that are visible from a public way.

Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, as amended on October 2, 2023, requires a decennial review of each existing Neighborhood Conservation District, beginning with the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District (HCM NCD) in 2024. The Half Crown-Marsh NCD encompasses two neighborhoods, formerly each designated as separate districts, which merged to create a singular, noncontiguous district in 2007. The district is located west of Harvard Square between Brattle Street and the river, with Hilliard Street on the east and Lowell Street on the west. The district is bisected by Longfellow Park, which is protected by the Old Cambridge Historic District.

The Half Crown-Marsh NCD is comprised of two historically working-class enclaves surrounded by predominantly middle- to upper-class housing. The Half Crown neighborhood adjoins a formerly industrial quarter of Harvard Square, while the more densely settled Marsh retains many of its original Irish worker's cottages. While the Half Crown was threatened by redevelopment in the 1970s, gentrification of the Marsh began in the 1930s and intensified in the early 2000s.

The Half Crown-Marsh NCD has fewer renter households than the city in general (47% compared to 70% citywide). The population of the district is older than the city in general, with 34% age 65 or over vs. 12% citywide, and has a larger share of White residents (88% vs. 57% citywide). Between the 2010 and 2020 Census, the self-reported White and Black populations declined slightly while the Asian and Hispanic population increased, though the overall population has remained steady. The district is also very dense, with a 43% higher population density than the city overall.

Between January 1, 2014, and June 1, 2024, the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission or the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) staff representative for the district reviewed 466 applications for building permits within the district. A majority (77%) of applications were for interior alterations, general maintenance and repairs in-kind, which can be reviewed by Commission staff and issued a Certificate of Non-Applicability within a matter of days. Roughly 22% of applications involved exterior architectural features (not including color). These were reviewed by the Half Crown-Marsh Commission at their monthly public hearings.

At the monthly hearings the Commission, CHC staff, and applicants discuss proposed projects and how they align with district goals and objectives. Cases that require a public hearing can include projects like demolition and new construction, additions, new front porches, replacement windows or new window or door openings on publicly visible facades, and new fences over 4'-0". Most applications are approved as submitted or approved with conditions to mitigate adverse visual impacts of the proposal. *Of the total 117 applications heard by the Commission between 2014-2024, 99 (85%) were approved as submitted or with conditions; 8 (7%) were denied; 7 (6%) were withdrawn by the applicant, and 3 (2%) were granted Certificates of Hardship. No projects that would have added to the city's housing stock were denied. Only projects considered deleterious to the district were rejected.*

Reviews by CHC Staff and/or the HCM Commission have enhanced the unique character and architectural quality of the neighborhood, allowing for change for present living conditions, while conserving the architectural qualities of buildings and their settings. The Commission has balanced the

smaller scale of the housing stock with the gentrification that has occurred in the neighborhood in past decades without limiting new housing construction or arbitrarily impeding on property owners' desires for upgrades.

I. Introduction:

Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, as amended on October 2, 2023, requires a decennial review of each existing Neighborhood Conservation District, beginning with the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District (HCM NCD) in 2024. Section 2.78.280 (B) states that, *The Historical Commission with other relevant City departments will present a report to the City Council no later than September 30 of the year in which review is scheduled to occur. The report shall contain:*

1. Summary of current NCD membership, boundaries, guidelines, and procedures.
2. Summary of the activities of the NCD over the previous decade including (but not limited to) a list of any cases in which an application was outright rejected as well as relevant and instructive examples of cases in which applications were approved or approved with modifications.
3. Information about any demographic changes or other major changes that occurred within the district over the previous decade
4. Guidance on recommended changes to the boundaries, guidelines, and/or procedures of the NCD, if there are any.
5. Assessment of progress toward achieving council diversity and representation goals for the NCD.

This report will review the activities of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission during the years 2014-2024.

II. History and Establishment of the HCM NCD

Historically and architecturally, the Half Crown and Marsh areas are similar, but not identical. Established Yankee tradesmen settled the Half Crown area in the 1840s, while the Marsh was built up in the 1850s primarily by recently arrived Irish laborers. Houses in the Marsh tend to be slightly smaller and more densely concentrated, but sections of both neighborhoods exhibit the full range of 19th century working-class and middle-class vernacular residential architecture. Today, both neighborhoods are zoned Residential B, C-1, and C-2 and the NCDs were combined following a study.

a. Half Crown Area

Located immediately west of Harvard Square, the Half Crown section of the District contains approximately 75 properties on Mount Auburn, Hilliard, Revere, Gerry, Brewer and Ash streets as well as 5 large apartment buildings and 3 frame houses on Memorial Drive. The Half Crown NCD, designated on April 9, 1984, was the first such district established in the city of Cambridge following adoption of Article III of Chapter 2.78 of the City Code, the enabling ordinance for NCDs and landmarks. The oldest of the city's five NCDs, the Half Crown NCD was also the smallest in geographic area and number of properties protected.

The Half Crown area originated as part of the estate of William Brattle, whose 1727 house still stands at 42 Brattle Street. Between 1728 and 1746 he expanded his estate to about 18 acres, extending from

Brattle Square to the Charles River. The most important acquisition was the seven-acre 'Half Crown Lot,' which included Windmill Hill and about 800 feet of river frontage between the foot of Hawthorn Street and a canal that marked the western border of the Ox Marsh. This part of the Brattle estate was broken up beginning in 1823, but sales produced only two houses in the next ten years, including Stephen Wyeth's Federal style house at 7-9 Hilliard Place in 1824. In the early 1840s the next owner laid out Hilliard Street, and in 1845 this became a through street between Mount Auburn Street and Appian Way. The initial owners of the early Federal and Greek Revival houses on Hilliard Street were tradesmen, but beginning in 1867 an attorney, Samuel Batchelder Jr., built several more elaborate houses there.

The residential development of Ash Street, an ancient way that divided the Brattle estate from the Vassall-Batchelder estate, began in 1834. James Childs bought one small lot and built a singular 1½-story cottage at 145 Mount Auburn Street in 1837. Andrew Waitt, a carpenter, put up 18 Ash Street for his own use in 1845 and the double house at 151 Mount Auburn Street in 1851. Waitt gave up his career as a builder and developer when he became the superintendent of college buildings in 1856, but his substantial houses established the character of the Mount Auburn-Ash Street intersection.



Half Crown neighborhood, 1916 Atlas Map.

The Brattle heirs sold Windmill Hill, which was separated from the rest of the estate by Mount Auburn Street, to the young and ambitious Professor Edward Everett in 1825. However, Everett lost his Harvard post when he entered Congress, and in 1835 he sold the still-undeveloped property to George Meacham, a Boston real estate broker living in Cambridge. Meacham sold the land along Revere Street and Nutting Road next to the Ox Marsh in 1839 and 1841. Then he hired Cambridge surveyor Alexander Wadsworth to lay out Everett Place (now Ash Street south of Mount Auburn) with house lots on both sides and sold all of them to George Nichols, the Cambridge bookseller, who quickly resold them for development. Meacham laid out the remainder of the property in 1849 with sixteen house lots along Gerry and Brewer streets and Chapman Place. By 1854, nine houses stood on Mount Auburn Street between Nutting and Ash streets and another nine on Brewer, Revere, and Ash streets. Over the

next fifty years, the neighborhood filled with small vernacular houses inhabited by carpenters, mechanics, and tradesmen.



The Half Crown neighborhood, c.1935. Viewed facing Gerry Street from Mount Auburn Street apartment building.

Between 1859 and 1869 the entire riverfront along Windmill Hill was acquired by the Cambridge Gas Light Company, which built a retort house and gasholder at the Brick Wharf in 1852. This facility, which received coal by schooner and barge and heated it to produce illuminating gas, dominated the riverfront until it was razed in 1900 after the construction of Memorial Drive. The five large apartment buildings that now divide the neighborhood from the river were built between 1914 and 1924 on the gasworks site.



12-20 Hilliard Street in 1967 (left) and 2009 (right).

The Zoning Code adopted by the city in 1962 placed the Half Crown neighborhood in a residential C-3 district, with an FAR of 4.0 and no height limit. The 1965 decision to locate the John F. Kennedy Library nearby on Bennett Street stimulated interest in the area, and in the 1970s developers proposed a

succession of projects for the former site of the University Press, on the eastern edge of the present neighborhood conservation district. These included a 24-story Holiday Inn, and later a mixed-use complex containing two twenty-story buildings.¹ Harvard University acquired the site in 1980 and developed University Place/University Green there to general acclaim. However, the neighborhood west of University Place/University Green was still zoned for unlimited height, and early in the morning of May 17, 1982 a contractor attempted to raze two houses at 5 and 7 Revere Street. A neighbor, Robert Withey, leapt on the moving bulldozer, removed the keys, and halted the demolition. The quarrel was resolved when Harvard bought these properties, repaired and sold the two houses, and built three compatible town houses to create a buffer along Gerry Street. In 1984, this area was secured against further development when the City Council designated it as the Half Crown Neighborhood Conservation District.

b. Marsh Area

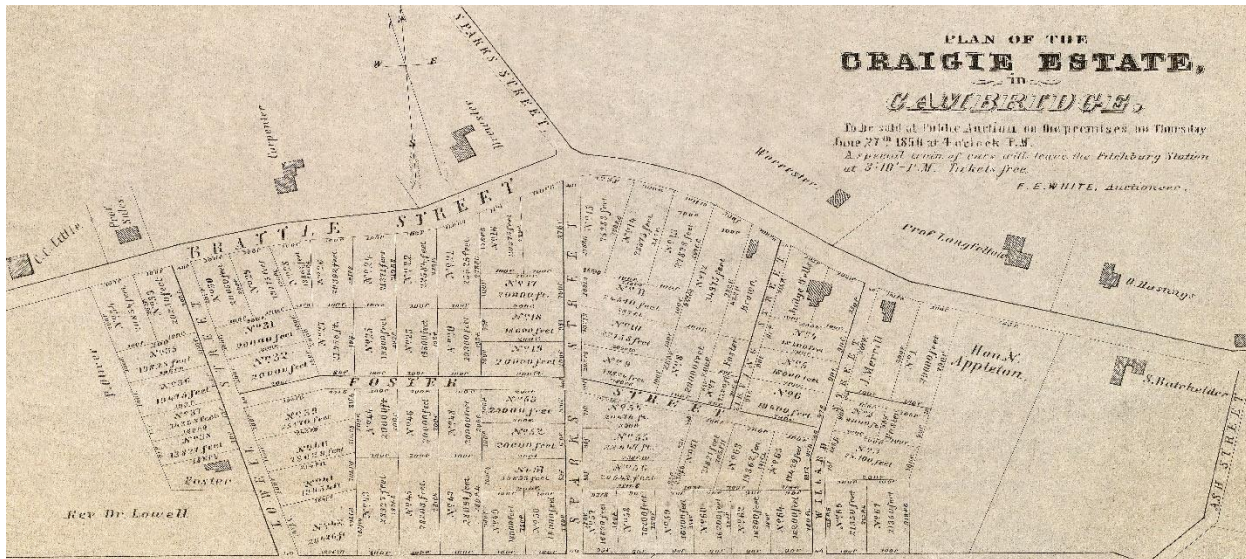
The Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District was designated in 2000 and contains approximately 147 wood frame residential buildings primarily on Willard, Brown, Sparks, Foster, Lowell, and Mount Auburn streets.

The Marsh area lies at the southwest end of land owned in the 18th-century by John Vassall. His estate of some 87 acres, the largest on Tory Row, was assembled over a period of twenty-eight years, reaching its largest extent in 1774. Vassall's heir, John Jr., enlarged the family's holdings and built the Vassall-Craigie-Longfellow mansion at 105 Brattle Street in 1759. All this was confiscated during the Revolution, sold by the Commonwealth in 1781, and resold several times before being acquired in 1791 by Andrew Craigie, a New York businessman and subsequently, the developer of East Cambridge.

On the south side of Brattle Street, the Vassall-Craigie estate stretched from near Hawthorn Street to Lowell Street. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow bought the field and meadow between Hawthorne and Willard streets in 1849 and kept it largely undeveloped to provide an unobstructed view of the river and the Brighton Hills from his house. (This tract, today's Longfellow Park, separates the Half Crown area from the Marsh). In 1843, the meadow between present Willard and Lowell streets passed to Craigie's heirs, who tried to develop the parcel by laying out twenty-two lots, mostly along Brattle Street. They also laid out Liberty and Union streets, renamed Willard and Foster by 1850, and Lowell Street, named for James Russell Lowell. The marshy area south of Foster Street was not initially subdivided.

¹ Until 1979, the zoning in this neighborhood allowed development with an FAR of 4.0 and unlimited height – which these projects exceeded. Establishment of the city's first overlay district capped heights at 100 feet and alleviated some development pressure.

The Brattle Street lots moved slowly and in October 1849 the heirs sold the remaining 36 acres to Gardiner Greene Hubbard, who in 1850 laid out sixty-seven ample lots and prepared the property for sale by auction. From the beginning, Hubbard's development fell into two distinct parts: the high ground near Brattle Street, where Hubbard's own house and other large dwellings sat on spacious lots, and the low land toward the river, which became a neighborhood primarily of Irish laborers known as the Marsh (or sometimes the Upper Marsh, in contrast to the Lower Marsh, near Banks Street).



Subdivision plan of Gardiner Hubbard's land (largely the Marsh NCD), showing sixty-seven lots to be sold at public auction on June 27, 1850.

Foster and Sparks streets formed the core of the lower area, where successive owners carved up Hubbard's original large lots, creating by 1873 a dense maze of narrow cul-de-sacs lined with closely built houses, some of them moved from elsewhere in Old Cambridge. The block between Willard, Mount Auburn, Sparks, and Foster streets was typical of this area. In 1850 Hubbard sold eleven of the original twelve lots to John C. Martain of Charlestown, a broker. In 1854 there were no houses on this block, although a few stood on the north side of Foster Street, particularly along Willard (now Foster) Place, where eight house lots had been carved out of a single 100-by-200-foot lot in Hubbard's original plan. By 1856, there were twelve households on Foster Street and its tributaries; most were Irish, and the range of occupations foretold the future of the area: half the wage earners were laborers, and the other half were carpenters, teamsters, and stonecutters.



Present-day Marsh neighborhood in 1873. The neighborhood saw little development besides worker's cottages in clusters.

The block west of Sparks followed a similar pattern, with twenty-eight small houses on several narrow cul-de-sacs put up by 1873. Many of the houses in the Foster Street area are the two-room center-hall worker's cottages set on high basements which are found in poorly drained areas throughout Cambridge. Here, they often face narrow lanes only 16 feet wide. Some very small houses, such as 50 Foster (1855) and 92 Foster (1868), were built as double houses, although each unit contained only one room per floor. Also typical of the area are the one-story double Mansard cottages on Dinsmore Court (1871-73) and the simple two-story Mansards at 191-199 Mount Auburn Street, all by the builder James Dinsmore.

For much of the early 20th-century, The Marsh was a neighborhood of Irish and Italian working-class families. Alongside these original families are many who have lived in The Marsh since the 1950s and '60s when the area began to gentrify. The area's convenience to Harvard Square, Mount Auburn Hospital, and the river, as well as its village character and the affordability of its modest houses made it an attractive choice for a new contingent of professionals and academics.

In the early 1960s, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority declared that several small, frame commercial buildings and concrete block garages at the corner of Sparks and Mount Auburn streets were blighted and took 17 properties by eminent domain. The Riverview Apartments constructed on the site in 1962 has been credited with spurring considerable private redevelopment in this district of modest 19th-century workers' houses.



Foster Place in 1967 (left) and 2023 (right)

Private efforts to redevelop the area include the 1967 conversion of 10 concrete block garages into housing by Sheldon and Anabel Dietz, and the continual upgrading and expansion of residences in the decades since then. This activity reached a peak in the late 1990s, when four demolition permit applications were filed for neighborhood houses between September 1997 and March 1999. With the exception of 106 Foster Street (which was relocated to comply with zoning), applicants cited the modest architecture and structural damage caused by the area's marshy subsurface soil conditions as justification for the demolition of the properties. The presentation of four demolition permit applications in a small geographic area in quick succession reflected the pressures of a very strong real estate market which exposed the vulnerability of smaller, out-of-repair buildings whose land values had increased substantially. Residents became alarmed that new construction could replace the neighborhood's simple 19th-century cottages.

Of the four demolition permit applications, three were ultimately withdrawn. While the threat to these buildings did not materialize, the potential for significant changes, through demolition or substantial renovation, induced a group of Marsh property owners to approach the Historical Commission staff in the spring of 1999 about developing a petition for a neighborhood conservation district. In April, fourteen residents submitted a petition to initiate a neighborhood conservation district study for the area bounded by Willard, Foster, Lowell and Mount Auburn streets, and including only the south side of Foster Street; in June the Commission voted to accept the petition and initiate a study of the Marsh NCD. After a yearlong study, a committee appointed by the City Manager recommended the establishment of a neighborhood conservation district with some adjustments to the original proposed boundaries, mainly to exclude the Riverview apartment building. Neighborhood comment to the Study Committee overwhelmingly supported the position that all determinations by the NCD commission should be binding. The City Council adopted the order establishing the Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District on December 8, 2000.

c. Consolidation of Half Crown-Marsh Districts

The impetus for the consolidation of the two districts was a desire for greater administrative efficiency, public participation, and commission effectiveness. As a result, in July 2004 the Cambridge Historical Commission voted to request that the City Manager appoint a committee to study the possible consolidation of the Marsh and Half Crown NCDs. The study committee concluded that the two districts were sufficiently consistent in their historic and architectural development that the objectives and

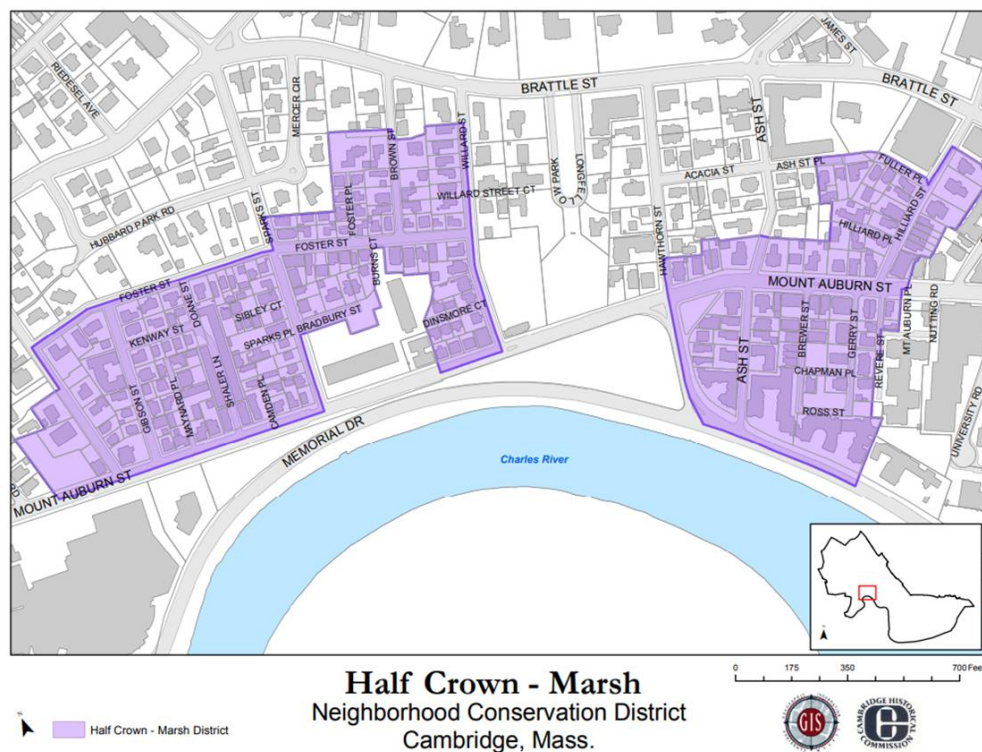
principles of the Marsh NCD order could apply equally to the Half Crown NCD, with additional wording to reflect the character of the Half Crown's architecture and street patterns.

On July 30, 2007, the Cambridge City Council, by a unanimous 9-0 vote, adopted an Order to establish the consolidated the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District (see Appendix A, Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Order). The new district became effective upon the appointment by the City Manager of a new NCD commission with qualified representatives on the Consolidation Effective Date of December 1, 2007.

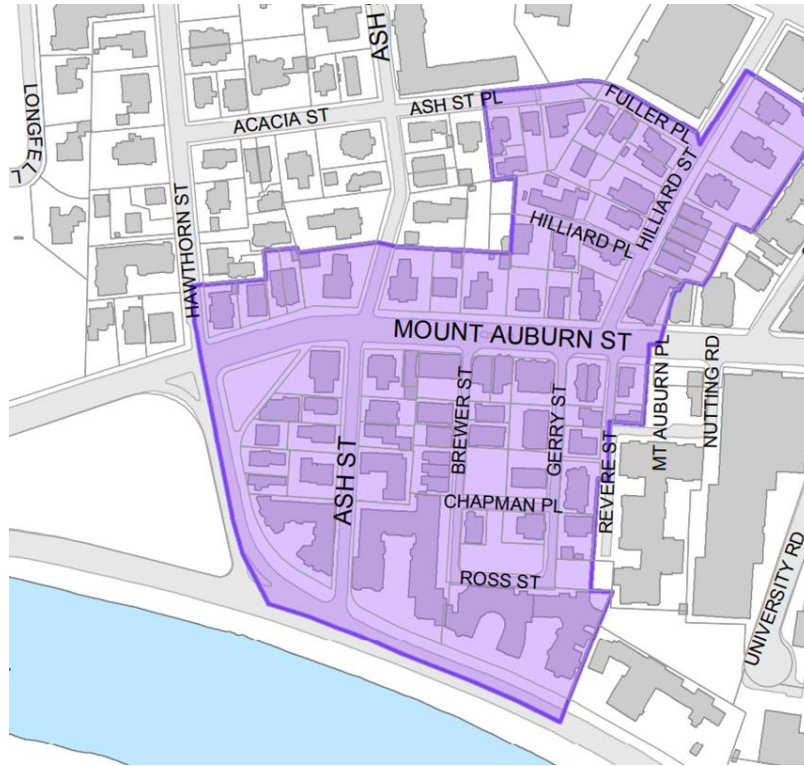
III. Current Conditions of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD

a. Present Boundaries

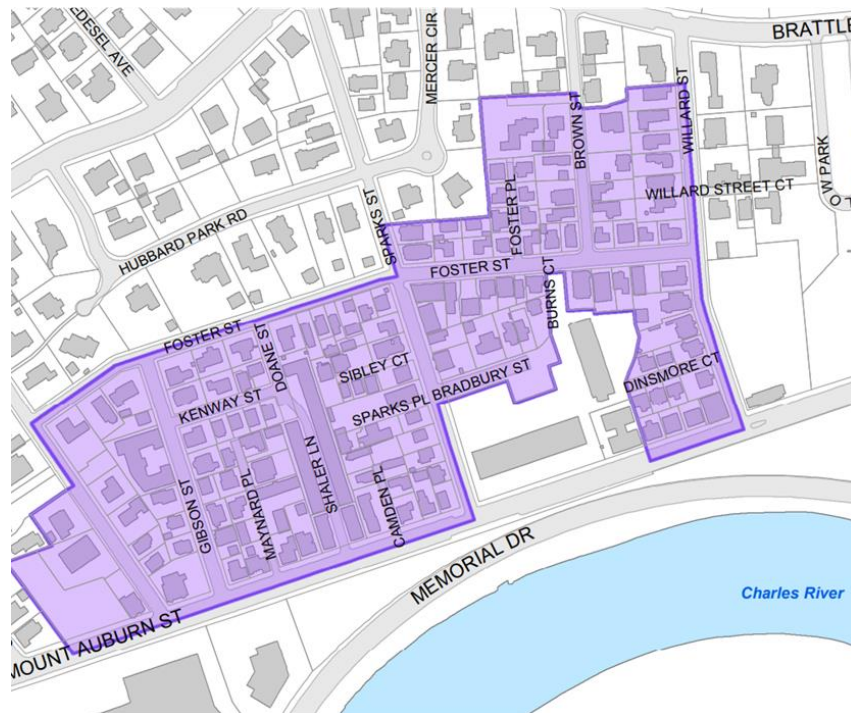
The Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District encompasses two neighborhoods, formerly each designated as separate districts, which merged to a singular, noncontiguous district in 2007. The district is located west of Harvard Square between Brattle Street and the river, with Hilliard Street on the east and Lowell Street on the west. The district is bisected by Longfellow Park, which is part of the Old Cambridge Historic District.



The former Half Crown district boundary is centered on Mount Auburn Street and is roughly bounded by Ash Street Place and Fuller Place to the north, Memorial Drive to the south, and Hawthorn and Hilliard streets to the west and east respectively. This section of the district is located between the Old Cambridge Historic District and the Harvard Square Conservation District.



The former Marsh district boundary is largely centered on Sparks Street and is roughly bounded by Mount Auburn Street to the south, Lowell and Willard streets to the west and east, and parcels south of Brattle Street to the north. This section of the district abuts part of the Old Cambridge Historic District.



b. Membership of Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission

Until recent amendments to Section 2.78.160.B, the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission allowed for the membership of five members and three alternates. As stated in 2.78, “the members shall include three residents of the neighborhood, not less than two of whom shall be homeowners; one Neighborhood property owner (who may or may not be a Neighborhood homeowner); and one member or alternate of the Cambridge Historical Commission.” At least two of the members or alternates were to have professional qualifications in real estate, architecture, or historic preservation; and at least one other member or alternate were to have professional qualifications in landscape architecture, urban planning, law, or geotechnical engineering.

The present membership of the HCM NCD Commission includes seven commissioners with varied educational and personal backgrounds. Members on the commission include architects, a real estate agent, doctors, a director at a pharmaceutical company, and an author and lecturer. The members and alternate members serve for terms of three years and can be reappointed or remain on the commission until their successors are appointed by the City Manager and approved by the City Council.

The recent amendments to Chapter 2.78.160 state that: “...City Manager shall appoint a neighborhood conservation district commission to consist of seven members and three alternates who shall by reason of experience or education have demonstrable knowledge and concern for improvement, conservation, and enhancement of the district, and whose composition represents the diversity of the designated neighborhood in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and property ownership or tenancy. Appointments shall reflect the City's goals for anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion... Members and alternates must have the ability to work and interact effectively with individuals and groups with a variety of identities, cultures, backgrounds, and ideologies.”

The membership shall be as follows:

Member 1. District homeowner

Member 2. District renter

Member 3. District resident

Member 4. District resident

Member 5. District business operator/owner or District resident

Member 6. Historical Commission member/CHC alternate or Cambridge resident

Member 7. Cambridge resident with professional qualifications

Alternate 1. District resident

Alternate 2. District resident

Alternate 3. District resident

Due to these recent amendments to membership of NCD commissions, the City Manager will be advertising for new members and alternates for the Half Crown-Marsh Commission and other NCDs in the coming months.

c. Objectives and Principles for the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District

The Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District exists:

to preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City; to improve the quality of its built environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, areas, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic, racial, or social history of the City; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas or structures; to welcome a diverse set of residents and broaden appreciation for individuals with marginalized identities who have shaped Cambridge's history; and by furthering these purposes in balance with other City priorities such as affordable housing construction, environmental sustainability, and accessibility to promote the public welfare by making the City a more attractive, desirable, affordable, diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive place in which to live and work (Cambridge Municipal Code, Ch. 2.78, Art. III).

With certain exceptions, the Ch. 2.78, Art. III and the Order establishing the district provide that “no structure ... within a neighborhood conservation district shall be constructed or altered in any way that affects exterior architectural features unless the ... neighborhood conservation district commission having jurisdiction shall first have issued a certificate of appropriateness, a certificate of nonapplicability or a certificate of hardship with respect to such construction or alteration.,

The following objectives and principles are to be applied in considering applications for certificates of appropriateness or hardship in the Half Crown-Marsh NCD. The Commission shall endeavor to:

1. Conserve the historic architectural character of the neighborhood, including the modest character that typifies the mid to late 19th-century workers' and suburban housing of the Neighborhood, and the overall simplicity of its traditional wood-frame vernacular architecture, as well as the early 20th-century apartment houses where they exist.
2. Conserve the historic development patterns of the neighborhood, including its dense network of short, through-block streets, courts, back streets, and ways.
3. Conserve views through yards and between houses to maintain the pattern of visual layering that characterizes streetscapes in the neighborhood while respecting the residential privacy of individual properties.
4. Allow for architectural diversity and individualized alterations while respecting the traditional small scale of the housing stock.
5. Encourage the planting of trees and greenery to enhance the landscape amenities of the neighborhood.
6. Encourage low fences to define the street edge while protecting views of houses and through yards, and also while permitting flexibility to minimize the adverse visual effect of trash containers, air compressors, transformers and other fixtures whose location may not otherwise be practically screened from public view.

7. Consider traffic impacts of proposed development as they may affect traditional street patterns and pedestrian activity.
8. Discourage the construction of parking lots as a principal use.

IV. Summary of Activities of Half Crown - Marsh NCD Commission: 2014-2024

The Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission reviews applications for new construction, demolition, and alterations that affect the exterior architectural features, other than color, of structures within the District. These cases are reviewed and are typically approved by the Commission at their monthly meeting, either as submitted or with conditions.

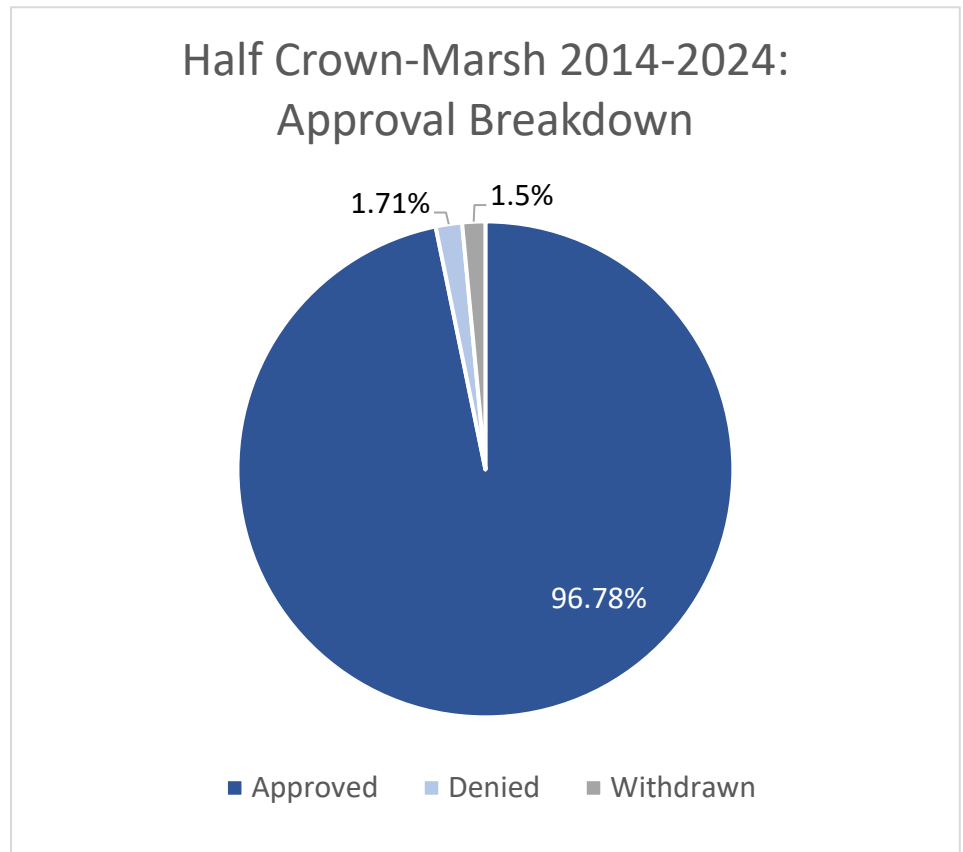
Applications for interior alterations, general maintenance and repairs in-kind, can be reviewed by Commission staff and issued a Certificate of Non-Applicability. This review is administrative and does not need to go before the Commission at their public meetings. These cases are typically reviewed and approved in a matter of days from receipt of a complete application.

a. Summary of Cases 2014-2024

Prior to the consolidation of the districts in 2007 the Half Crown and Marsh Districts exercised their jurisdiction independently. The Half Crown NCDC in its early years preserved several houses from speculative demolition, approved the replacement of a severely compromised row house at 5-9 Gerry Street with a replica, and established uniform standards for window replacements as the Memorial Drive apartment buildings converted to condominium ownership. In the more densely settled Marsh neighborhood, the establishment of the Marsh NCDC in 2000 tamped down intrusive redevelopment schemes, and reviews focused on alterations, window replacements, and controlling fence heights to preserve views, light and air between closely packed houses. In the consolidation, the slightly stricter March guidelines were adopted for both areas, and the Half Crown's non-binding review for alterations was abandoned.

The following analysis reviews the performance of the combined Half Crown-Marsh District for the period 2014-2024.

Between January 1, 2014, and June 1, 2024, the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission and/or the Cambridge Historical Commission staff representative for the district reviewed 466 applications for certificates of appropriateness, nonapplicability or hardship. Of these 466 applications, 451 (96.8%) were approved; 8 (1.7%) were denied; and 7 (1.5%) were withdrawn by the applicant. Of the 451 approved applications, these were all granted one of three types of approval certificates: a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA), a Certificate of Non-Applicability (CNA), or a Certificate of Hardship (COH).

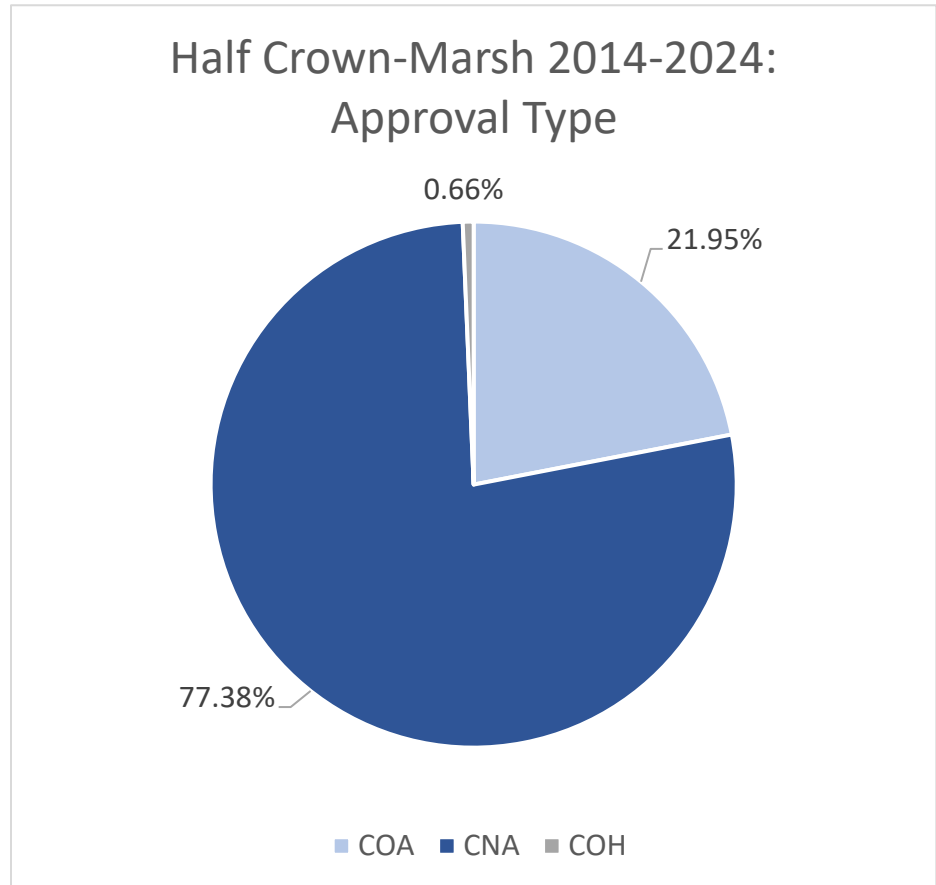


A Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) is typically granted to cases that are approved following a public hearing. Cases that require a public hearing can include projects like demolition and new construction, additions, new front porches, replacement windows, new window or door openings on publicly visible facades, and new fences over 4'-0". Of the 451 approved cases since 2014, 99 (22%) cases have been brought to a Commission hearing and were subsequently approved as submitted or approved with conditions. These are approved at the monthly commission meetings.

Certificates of Non-Applicability (CNA) are granted for cases that are staff-level review which typically involve work not visible from a public way, replacement of features in-kind, or work that falls under the list of exemptions in the district order. Of the 451 approved cases since 2014, 349 (77%) cases have been approved at the staff level. These cases take an average of 2-3 business days to be reviewed and approved by staff.

Certificates of Hardship (COH) are by far the least common approval certificates granted in the HCM NCD in the past ten years. Certificates of Hardship are issued for work which is not otherwise appropriate if the Commission determines

that failure to approve an application would entail a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, and that the work would not be a significant detriment to the district. Additionally, these certificates may be granted if the Commission cannot establish a quorum of voting members at a public meeting within 45 days after the filing of a complete application by the applicant. Of the 451 approved cases since 2014, 3 (<1%) applications have been granted Certificates of Hardship. These three cases include: a rebuild of a house following a loss by fire, new HVAC condenser and trash enclosure in front yard due to extremely tight lot conditions, and approval of a major renovation due to lack of quorum.



Demolition and new construction projects are uncommon in the district, likely due to current zoning and the smaller lot sizes in a majority of the neighborhood, limiting the construction of larger or taller structures. Since 2013, only three cases have involved exterior demolition of 25% or more of a structure, and only one case involved a demolition of a residential structure and new construction in its place (137 Mount Auburn Street, detailed below). One of the three demolition cases involved demolition of a garage at 7 Gibson Street (also detailed below); the initial proposal involved a two-story structure with sky-bridge connecting the new garage to the main house, while a revised proposal that involved the demolition of the garage and new construction of a detached office-space for the owner was approved. The final demolition case was for the demolition and new construction of an ell at 138 Mount Auburn Street, a house now occupied by offices. This application was originally denied as the proposed ell addition was not of an appropriate scale. The owner returned to the Commission in early 2020 and

was approved with a modified design. The project was never completed, however, possibly due to complications in the market following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of the 117 cases that required a hearing before the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission and received a Certificate of Appropriateness, a majority of those (39) involved windows. Many window cases reviewed involve replacement windows or the request to alter existing window openings. The Commission is sympathetic to homeowners' desires to make their interior spaces work best for them, so the Commission works with owners and applicants to mitigate adverse impacts of irregularly spaced windows and sizes while allowing changes to the visible façades. The commission routinely recommends restoration of salvageable wooden windows where appropriate, but have also approved clad-wood windows with exterior and interior muntins for many projects.

Another common request in the district is for new or updated fences and gates that are taller than the 4'-0" height exemption intended to preserve public views. From 2013-2024, 19 of the 117 applications reviewed by the Commission involved fences, with 15 of these cases receiving approval either as submitted or with conditions. Four of these 15 fence cases reviewed by the Commission were denied, largely because they would block views of houses close to, or at the street.

b. Sample Cases, 2014-2024

While the HCM Commission reviews cases ranging from replacement windows and doors to demolition and new construction, the district has seen fewer major new construction and gut-renovation cases compared to other neighborhoods in Cambridge. Many cases reviewed are submitted by owner-occupants and are modest changes to their residences to adapt these houses to modern living standards. A majority of applications reviewed requested new sustainability features like solar panels (amendments to 2.78 now make these items exempt from review), new windows, and new dormers or small additions and largely comply with the district goals and guidelines, sometimes with slight conditions or comments by the Commission.

i. 19 Brown Street

In 2019, owners of a modest, 1886 worker's cottage wanted to update their home, adding a new mudroom at the front door and windows to the street-facing façade to increase natural light inside. Following on-site discussions with staff, the owners furnished plans which carried an existing shed-roof addition towards the street to serve as a mudroom, with more glazing and glass door to provide opacity toward the street, somewhat resembling an open porch.

The HCM Commission reviewed the proposal and felt that the new windows at the front provided symmetry at the façade and were appropriate for the house and the proposed entry addition was of an appropriate design and scale. The HCM Commission approved the proposal citing it "Allow[ed] for architectural diversity and individualized alterations while respecting the traditional small scale of the housing stock", per the District Goals. Solar panels at the roof were also approved without conditions.



19 Brown Street, Before (2019)



19 Brown Street, After (2021)

ii. 31-33 Willard Street

In 2013, the owner of a two-unit 1870 double-house proposed a renovation to the Second Empire style Victorian residence, which was significant as part of a larger collection of mansard-roofed houses built nearby by James Dinsmore, a developer after the Civil War. The house as existing, was covered in vinyl siding including at the roof, had cheap replacement windows, and retained little historic or architectural character beyond its form.

CHC Staff met on site with the owner and contractor numerous times to explain the review process for the HCM district, and encouraged a replication of the missing elements according to what was uncovered underneath the layers of siding and 20th century renovations. The owners underwent a renovation which included the removal of vinyl siding and addition of new, wooden clapboard siding and slate roof, which the house had historically. Additionally, the vinyl replacement windows were replaced with high-quality, insulated wooden windows simulating the original two-over-two lights. The review was largely restoring original conditions and was subsequently approved following staff consultation and numerous site visits. Without the HCM NCD, the owners would have likely undergone a gut-renovation which would have diminished the original architectural quality of this 1870 house. Even if cases are not required to go before the HCM Commission, staff-level review and consultations can help shape renovation projects to align with the district's goals and architectural character.



31-33 Willard Street, Before (2011)



31-33 Willard Street, After (2020)

iii. 137 Mount Auburn Street

Since 2014, only one application was submitted within the Half Crown-Marsh NCD for demolition and new construction, that case was for 137 Mount Auburn Street. In 2016, the owner reached out to the CHC staff to understand the process of a demolition and feasibility of new construction being allowed on the site. Staff informed the owner that the commissioners weigh the significance and integrity of the existing building, and if they determine that demolition is not incongruous to the goals and guidelines of the district, they review the replacement project in the context of the surrounding area.

At the public hearing, it was determined by the Commission that the 1889 cottage had lost much of its architectural integrity and demolition of the residence was acceptable, leaving the replacement project for review. A local architect furnished plans for a contextual new construction project with two residential units in a single, three-story frame building. The architect pulled elements from local, vernacular architecture found in the neighborhood including: a front porch, gable roof, double-hung windows, and projecting bay. When presented to the commission, the architecture and surrounding context were analyzed and ultimately, the project was approved as submitted. The project has become a contemporary landmark in the neighborhood and often cited for inspiration for infill construction projects across the city.



137 Mount Auburn Street, original structure (2016)



137 Mount Auburn Street, new construction as completed.

iv. 7-9 Gibson Street

In 2016, the owner of 7-9 Gibson Street, proposed a major renovation to their residence which included a new roof profile, reopening the enclosed porches at the street, and new window openings on visible facades. When reviewed at a public hearing, the Commission was supportive of aspects of the proposal, but felt the addition of a mansard roof with bracketed cornice would introduce a completely different style (Second Empire) to a presently Queen Anne style house.



7-9 Gibson Street (2011)



7-9 Gibson Street, original proposed plan.

The Commission denied the change from a hipped roof to a mansard roof as submitted on the grounds that the mansard roof was incongruous to the objective of the order to conserve the historic architectural and modest character of the neighborhood. The restoration of the two front porches and window alterations were approved at the staff level.

In 2018, the same owner came back before the commission with a separate project, to demolish the detached one-story garage structure and replace it with a two-story garage with bathroom and studio space above. A skybridge from the main house was proposed to connect the second floor of the main house to the studio space in the new structure. At the public hearing, the Commission voted to deny this application as submitted as while the existing one-story garage was not significant, the proposed two-story structure would not be appropriate to the site as the scale and location of the new structure would be highly visible and a larger

massing than a secondary structure should be. Additionally, the skybridge addition was deemed incongruous to the goal, “Conserve the historic architectural character of the neighborhood, including the modest character that typifies the mid to late 19th-century workers’ and suburban housing of the neighborhood, and the overall simplicity of its traditional wood-frame vernacular architecture.”

The owner was approved in 2018 to demolish the one-story garage and replace it with a one-story office building for personal use.



7 Gibson Street, original two-story proposal with skybridge (upper) and approved proposal for conversion to office (lower).

v. Other Example Cases

- A stucco Dutch Colonial house at **11 Brown Street** was purchased by a developer, who in May 2021, submitted plans to gut-renovate the house and its large rear additions from the 1950s and 1970s. The plans called for all new windows and siding on the main house and additions, a new roof, an expanded addition and new windows at the rear (interior renovations and digging of the basement were not subject to review by

the HCM Commission). There was not a quorum of voting members of the Commission (the first time in years) to hear the case, so the proposal was granted a Certificate of Hardship and approved. Later items were reviewed and approved by the Commission, which included the new perimeter fence and restoration of the porch columns. The house was listed for sale in May 2024 for nearly \$17 Million.

- At **9 Brown Street**, a 1920s Dutch Colonial house was approved for a new entry portico to provide a cover for the landing at the front door.
- In 2019, a small worker's cottage at **20 Sparks Street** received approval by the Commission to install a new Tesla solar roof system with corresponding mechanical panels. The case was the first known example of a Tesla roof installed in Cambridge.
- The owners of a renovated worker's cottage at **245 Mount Auburn Street** in 2019 received approval to construct a new rear deck with pergola structure, and to build a new tall picket fence at the street. The Commission worked with the owner on the dimensions and design of the fence to both provide privacy for the owner on the busy street and retain views to the house. One of the owners later became a member of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD commission.
- Owners of **11 Dinsmore Court**, a densely populated dead-end street, were denied in their request to construct and extend a 6'-0" solid fence with a vehicular driveway gate. The tall fence was denied as the taller front yard fence was not in keeping with the character of the typical garden front yard fences. The commission suggested a shorter fence with vegetation as needed.
- In 2015, developers came to the Commission with a request for a major renovation to **35 Willard Street**. The historic Mansard house was at the time, covered in aluminum siding and retained little architectural integrity. After a public hearing and comments from the Commission, the applicant withdrew their application and resubmitted with a new application with a more modest façade and entry treatments. The second proposal was approved. The renovation converted the three-family house to a two-family residence. The HCM Commission has no jurisdiction over use or number of units in their review.

Denials on applications have been rare in the HCM District, with just 8 of 466 cases denied by the Commission in 10 years. Half of the denied cases going back to 2013 were for fences (15 Willard Street, 35 Willard Street, 11 Dinsmore Court, and 14 Brown Street. The HCM Commission denied these cases as the district encourages low, garden fences at the street, while permitting taller fences at the rear for privacy.

V. Demographic and Housing Analysis

To understand information about any demographic changes or other major changes that occurred within the district over the previous decade, Cambridge Historical Commission staff

consulted with Scott Walker, Senior Manager for Data Services at the Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD), who provided an analysis on the demographics and housing types and their changes in the past ten years. Portions of the CDD analysis of the HCM NCD are included below. The full document dated 06/05/2024 is included in the appendix to this report.

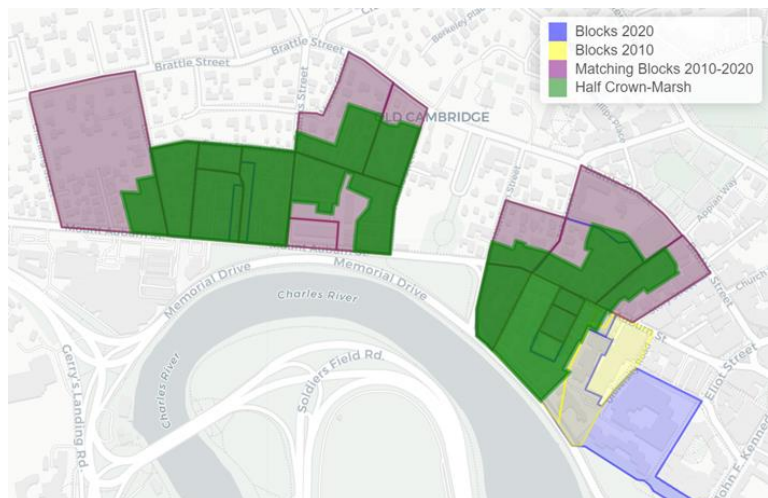
a. Demographic Study

i. Methodology

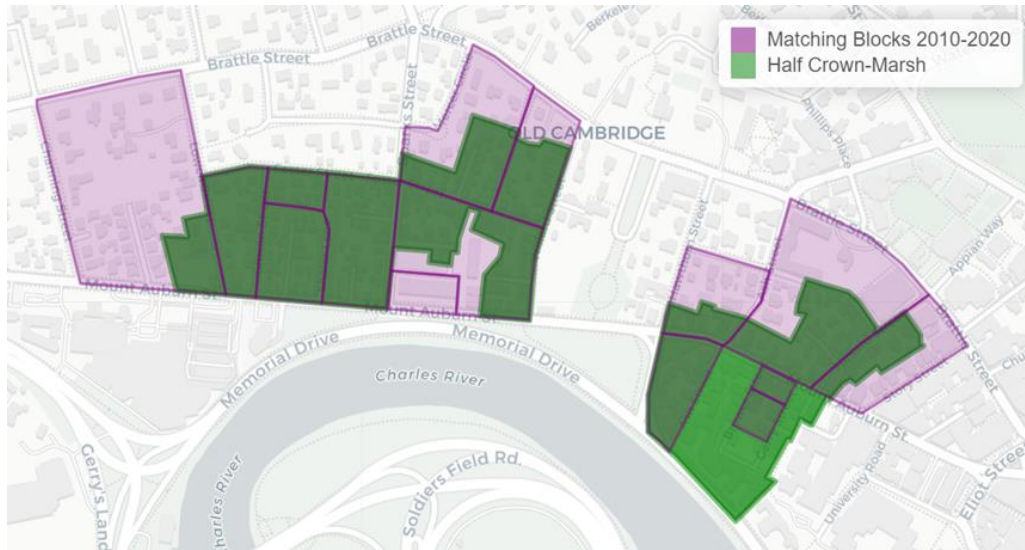
As the Half Crown-Marsh District is small, non-contiguous, and does not follow Census geography lines, it presents some challenges for detailed demographic analysis.

The American Community Survey (ACS) is the typical source of demographic data used by CDD, but the smallest geography available is the Block Group. The Block Groups in the HCM area include many properties that are not part of the NCD and have different characteristics than the properties within the district. The ACS is also a sample survey, and as a result, the levels of uncertainty would be unacceptably high for such a small area. Therefore, it was decided that it would be best to use data from the 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census, which includes results at the Block level.

Census boundaries changed in the area between 2010 and 2020, and as the NCD boundaries do not perfectly line up with Census Blocks. A couple blocks were excluded from the analysis at the southeastern side of the district as they extend farther outside of the NCD and include some larger buildings that skew the results. The removal of the Census Blocks here remove the properties on Gerry, Brewer, and a section of Mount Auburn Street from the analysis.



Census Blocks that intersect the HCM NCD



Census Blocks used in CDD Analysis

ii. Census Data for Matching Blocks

Statistic	Census 2010	Census 2020
Housing Units	633	714
Occupied Housing Units	568	610
Renter Occupied	249	289
Owner Occupied	319	321
Population	1,073	1,239
Population Under 18	125	139
Population 65+	283	379
White Alone Population	999	982
Black or African American Alone Population	43	36
Asian Alone Population	114	133
Hispanic Population	62	66

iii. Discussion

Given the small study area and the unknown influence of data privacy measures, we cannot draw strong conclusions from the Census data. The relatively large change in housing units is more likely to be due to inclusion of one or more apartment buildings

in 2020 that were not included in 2010, or due to these buildings being “relocated” for data privacy purposes.

The general population characteristics remained largely stable, with the biggest change being the increase in the population 65 or over. This could also reflect stability as many of the occupants might be the same as in 2010, just 10 years older. The population of the NCD (comparisons between 2020 NCD and citywide values, also from the 2020 Census):

- Has fewer renter households than the city in general, with 47% vs. 70% citywide
- Is older than the city in general, with 34% age 65 or over vs. 12% citywide
- Has a larger share of White residents, with 88% vs. 57% citywide
- Has a smaller share of Black residents, with 3% vs. 11% citywide
- Has a smaller share of Asian residents, with 12% vs. 20% citywide
- Has a smaller share of Hispanic residents, with 6% vs. 9% citywide

b. Housing Study

i. Methodology

To better understand housing types, number of units, and values, it was determined that City of Cambridge Assessing data would provide the most comprehensive and readily accessible data. The City Assessor provides property data on its Open Data site as far back as FY2016 through FY2024. For the Housing Study analysis for the Half Crown-Marsh NCD area, parcels within the boundaries were analyzed for three years: FY2016, FY2020, and FY2024.

ii. Assessing Data for Half Crown-Marsh Parcels

Statistic	FY2016	FY2020	FY2024
Parcels	225	224	224
Buildings	226	226	226
Total Assessed Value	\$525,487,400	\$964,648,100	\$1,175,440,000
Average Assessed Value	\$2,335,500	\$4,306,465	\$5,247,500
Average Assessed Value of Single-Family Homes	\$849,363	\$1,168,152	\$1,480,496
Single Family Homes	130	133	133
Single Family Homes w/Auxiliary Apartment	6	6	6
Two-Family Homes	16	14	14
Three-Family Homes	13	11	11
4-8 Unit Apartment Buildings	4	4	4
8+ Unit Apartment Buildings	1	1	1
Condo Units	226	225	225
Condo Buildings	28	29	29
Owner-Occupied Properties	234	239	217

iii. Discussion

The data from the Assessing property database shows minimal change in number of parcels, buildings, or housing units the NCD over the period from FY2016 – FY2024. The largest change was the doubling of the assessed value of the properties (values are not adjusted for inflation).

A small number of buildings were altered to reduce the number of units in those buildings.

- Three two-family buildings were converted into single family homes.
- One three-family building was converted into a single family.
- One three-family building was converted into a two-family.

c. Additional Comparisons

The Land Use Data on the Open Data Portal is a revised version of the property database that provides a better representation of property uses and counts of residential units in Cambridge. Combining this with the GIS parcel and building footprint layers, allows for the analysis of additional comparisons between residential development in Half Crown-Marsh NCD area and the city as a whole.

Statistic	Half Crown – Marsh	Citywide
Lot area per dwelling unit (sq. ft.)	1,517	1,152
Population density based on 2020 Census (people/sq. mile)	26,209	18,274
Share of lot area covered by buildings for parcels with residential buildings	42.8%	38.1%

i. Discussion

- There is roughly a third more lot area per dwelling unit for parcels with residential uses in Half Crown-Marsh compared to the citywide value.
- Population density in Half Crown – Marsh is 43% higher than the city overall.
- If we add up the area of all parcels in the city with residential uses, we find that 42.8% of that area is covered by buildings in Half Crown – Marsh compared to 38.1% citywide.

VI. Guidance on Changes to HCM NCD and Neighborhood Discussion

CHC staff conducted public outreach through district-wide mailings, an online public meeting, a walking tour, and public hearings before the HCM and Cambridge Historical Commissions.

a. Public Meetings

May 20, 2024: The Half Crown-Marsh Commission held a public meeting on Zoom on Monday, May 20, 2024, to discuss the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission, its operations and effectiveness in the previous ten years as part of the newly established requirement for a decennial review for NCDs. Notices for the public meeting were mailed to all property owners in the district notifying them on the meeting and the objectives to be presented and discussed.

CHC staff presented a slide show, detailing the history of the HCM NCD and why it was established, the recent changes to Article 2.78 of the Municipal Code, the HCM jurisdiction and sample cases reviewed in the previous decade, and the analysis on demographic and housing data compiled by CDD.

At the meeting, members of the public asked questions regarding the Commission's jurisdiction on specific types of cases and did not provide comments or suggestions on changes to design review jurisdiction beyond the recent amendments to Article 2.78. Additionally, staff asked members of the public if they had thoughts on updating the boundary of the district, but no suggestions or comments were made.

September 9, 2024: The Half Crown-Marsh Commission held a public meeting on Zoom on Monday, September 9, 2024, to expand on its May 20th meeting and discuss the draft Decennial Review report and make recommendations. Notices were mailed to all property owners in the district notifying them on the meeting. Five Commissioners and 4 members of the public were in attendance. Staff updated the Commission and members of the public on the Decennial Review. The Commission voted 5-0 to reaffirm the existing Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District without modifications, as originally established by the City Council on July 30, 2007.

b. Walking Tour

Cambridge Historical Commission staff along with multiple members of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission held a walking tour through the district on Saturday, September 7th at 2:00pm. The tour was attended by roughly 15 residents and neighborhood stakeholders who were able to learn about the district, see previously reviewed and approved projects, and ask questions about the district and the HCM Commission.

c. Public Hearings

- CHC hearing on Sept. 12

VII. Assessment of Diversity and Representation on the HCM NCD

The Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission is presently made up of seven commissioners of a varied educational and personal background. Members on the commission include architects, a real estate agent, doctors, a director at a pharmaceutical company, and an esteemed author. Membership of the commission is over 50% female-identifying (4 of 7) and of a wide range of ages. With vacant positions

in the Commission, CHC staff will work with the City Manager's office to solicit new members and alternates that further represent the diversity of the neighborhood in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and property ownership or tenancy. Appointments will reflect the City's goals for anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

VIII. Conclusion

The Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission has been busy the past ten years reviewing cases ranging from window replacement and additions of solar panels to major gut renovations, demolition, and new construction.

The day-to-day operations and NCD Commission jurisdiction in administering the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District have proceeded without major incident and the impact of the district on property owners appears to be relatively minor. Disruptions in work schedules are avoided through close communication between city staff, owners and project teams. The volume of cases requiring public hearings has stayed relatively low (23%), which is typical of Historic and Neighborhood Conservation Districts in Cambridge. These cases tend to be larger projects which may additionally require review from other city boards and commissions. With 77% of cases approved administratively at the staff level within a matter of days, it can be said that the NCD does not cause extensive delays to the permitting process.

Due to current zoning regulations, the neighborhood is less at risk for major changes to the built environment, largely due to the size and distribution of house lots in the area. With so many smaller lots and so few under single ownership, the chances for major redevelopments for new housing are minimal.

CHC staff believes that the Commission continues to achieve the goal, "[to] conserve the historic architectural character of the neighborhood, including the modest character that typifies the mid to late 19th-century workers' and suburban housing of the neighborhood, and the overall simplicity of its traditional wood-frame vernacular architecture, as well as the early 20th-century apartment houses where they exist." The HCM NCD helps to preserve neighborhoods and housing that have historically been overlooked, neighborhoods built by and for working-class and immigrant residents and continue to provide relatively affordable housing opportunities (albeit at a high level compared to other communities).

The Commission conserves the unique character of a dynamic and ever-changing neighborhood which has in recent decades seen to periods of gentrification and increased wealth. Regardless of the changes to economic or social demographics, the neighborhood has retained its historic charm, walkability, and distinctiveness through the preservation of character-defining elements as new owners have made these houses their own. The NCD has not impeded progress, nor has it impeded City Council goals to increase access to affordable housing, promote sustainable use of energy and resiliency, and providing a forum for neighbors to engage in the city planning process at a smaller scale.

Of the 466 applications submitted from within the district in the past ten years, only eight were denied. The forum provided by both NCD Commission meetings and staff reviews has resulted in residential rehabilitations and led to greater historic preservation activity. Additionally, the recent amendments to Chapter 2.78 have provided exemptions for sustainability improvements such as solar panels and has removed oversight into existing or proposed affordable housing developments. At its September 9, 2024 public meeting, the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission unanimously voted to affirm the existing Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District without modifications, as originally established by the City Council on July 30, 2007.

Appendix A:

Map of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District

Appendix B:

City Council Order of July 30, 2007, Establishing the Half
Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District

Appendix C:

Guidelines for Infill Construction and Substantial Additions or Alterations

Appendix D:

Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD)
Analysis of Half Crown-Marsh Demographics and Housing,
05/14/2024

Appendix E:

Correspondence Received from the Public
Regarding the Decennial Review of the Half Crown-Marsh
Neighborhood Conservation District