



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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July 3, 2026

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Landmark Evaluation: Fifteen houses at 58-60, 64-66, 68-70, 80, 86, 90, 96-98, 102, 108, 112, 118, 124, 128, 134, and 140 Lexington Avenue

A petition was received on May 21, 2026, calling on the Historical Commission to initiate a landmark designation study under the provisions of Ch., 2.78, Art. III, “of each of the fifteen gambrel-roofed duplex houses [at 58-60, 64-66, 68-70, 80, 86, 90, 96-98, 102, 108, 112, 118, 124, 128, 134, and 140 Lexington Avenue,] all designed by Elmer Buckley in 1912-13, noting that each has significance as they contribute to a truly unique, cohesive environment and demonstrate a uniformity of design not seen anywhere else in Cambridge.” The Election Commission verified all 44 signatures, and a public hearing was scheduled for July 9.



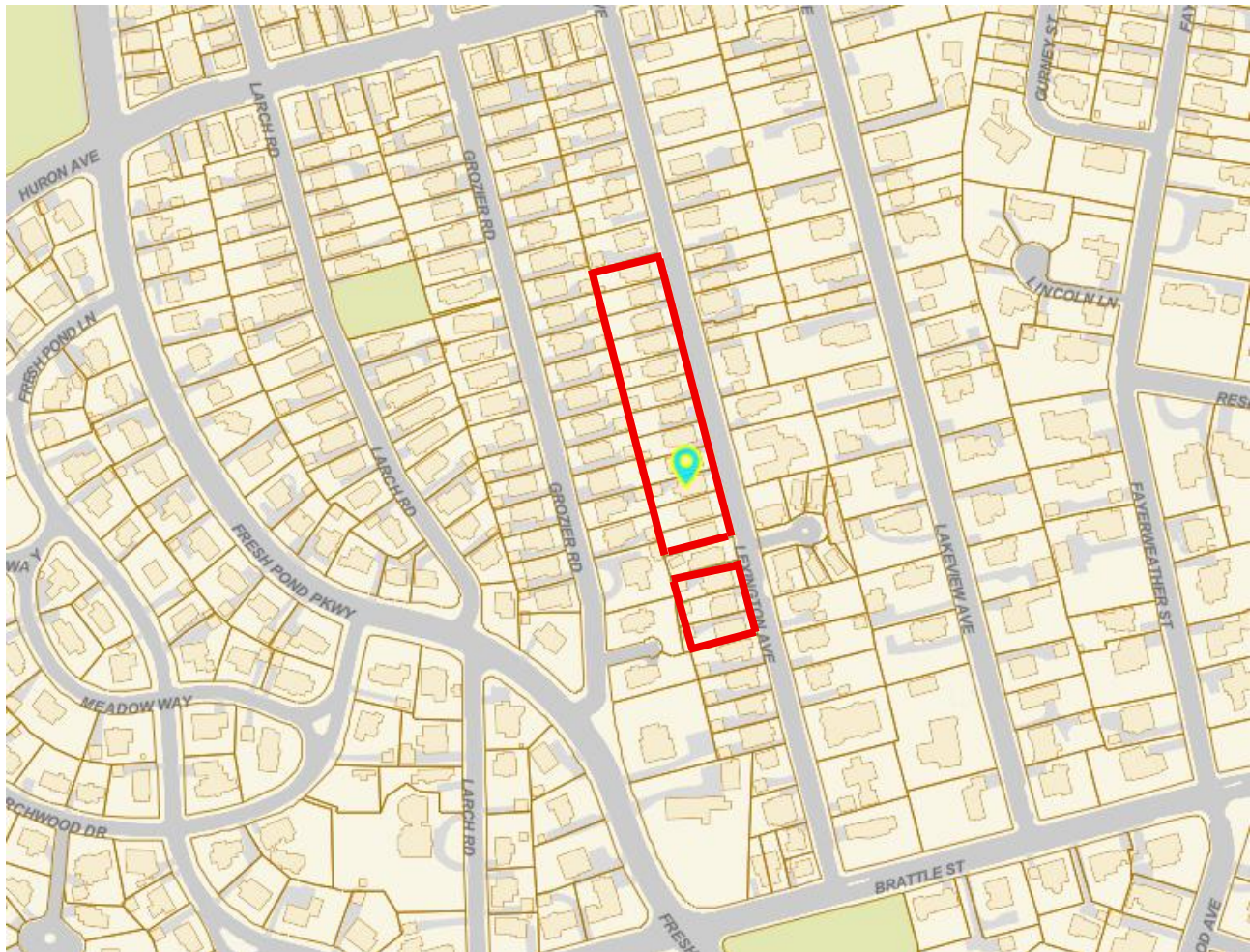
Lexington Avenue, looking south with 140 at right.

CHC photo, 2009

Description

The fifteen houses listed in the petition include all the survivors of the sixteen duplex houses erected on the west side of Lexington Avenue in 1912-1913; number 72-74 was lost to a fire in 2011 and replaced by a modern house. The houses were substantially identical when constructed. All occupy lots of either 5,296 or 5,297 square feet, with frontages of about 49' and a depth of 122'.

The entire area is in a Residence C-1 multi-family zoning district. Current C-1 zoning allows for four-stories (45 feet) as-of-right. On lots larger than 5,000 square feet, construction can be six-stories (74 feet) if 20 percent of the square footage in the building is dedicated to affordable housing. The zoning requires a minimum 5-10 feet for the front yard setback and at least 5-foot setbacks at the sides and rear.



Petitioned houses in the context of West Cambridge.

Cambridge GIS, Assessor's map

The fifteen houses present subtle variations on the Queen Anne Style. All have identical footprints and all present the same setbacks, shape and massing as 3½-story houses with prominent gambrel roofs. Within this basic framework the houses show significant variations in fenestration, cross gables, dormers, porches (inset or projecting), siding (clapboards or shingles), and bay windows (present or not). Some of these variations are original; others are the result of later alterations, but the overall form remains consistent.

Circumstances of the Petition

On February 10, 2025, the City Council adopted an amendment to the zoning code that allowed multi-family development in all residential districts. In June 2025 the Executive Director received a query regarding the significance of 90 Lexington Avenue with regard to the city's Demolition Review Ordinance, Ch. 2.78, Art. II of the City Code. The Director advised the developer, Stephen Suida, that he considered the house significant and that while an application for full demolition would have to be considered by the Historical Commission at a public hearing, a partial demolition could be approved administratively if it preserved the main part of the house. The developer's application for a three-story rear addition, leaving the house intact except for its back porches and a one-story ell, is currently undergoing review by the Inspectional Services Department. The proposed project would contain 10 units. This plan excited concern among the abutters, who organized the landmark designation petition when advised that a neighborhood conservation district petition would be unlikely to win acceptance.



Proposed addition at 90 Lexington Avenue, July 8, 32025

History

Joshua Coolidge purchased the Colonial-era pasture that became Lexington Avenue from Elbridge Gerry's estate in 1816. In 1870, his heirs sold the property to developers who platted a subdivision with thirty-five large house lots, mostly 100 feet wide, along Lake View Avenue and the east side of Lexington. Three years later another developer acquired an adjoining field and laid out the west side of Lexington Avenue with large lots like those on Lake View, but the Panic of 1873 halted development for almost two decades.



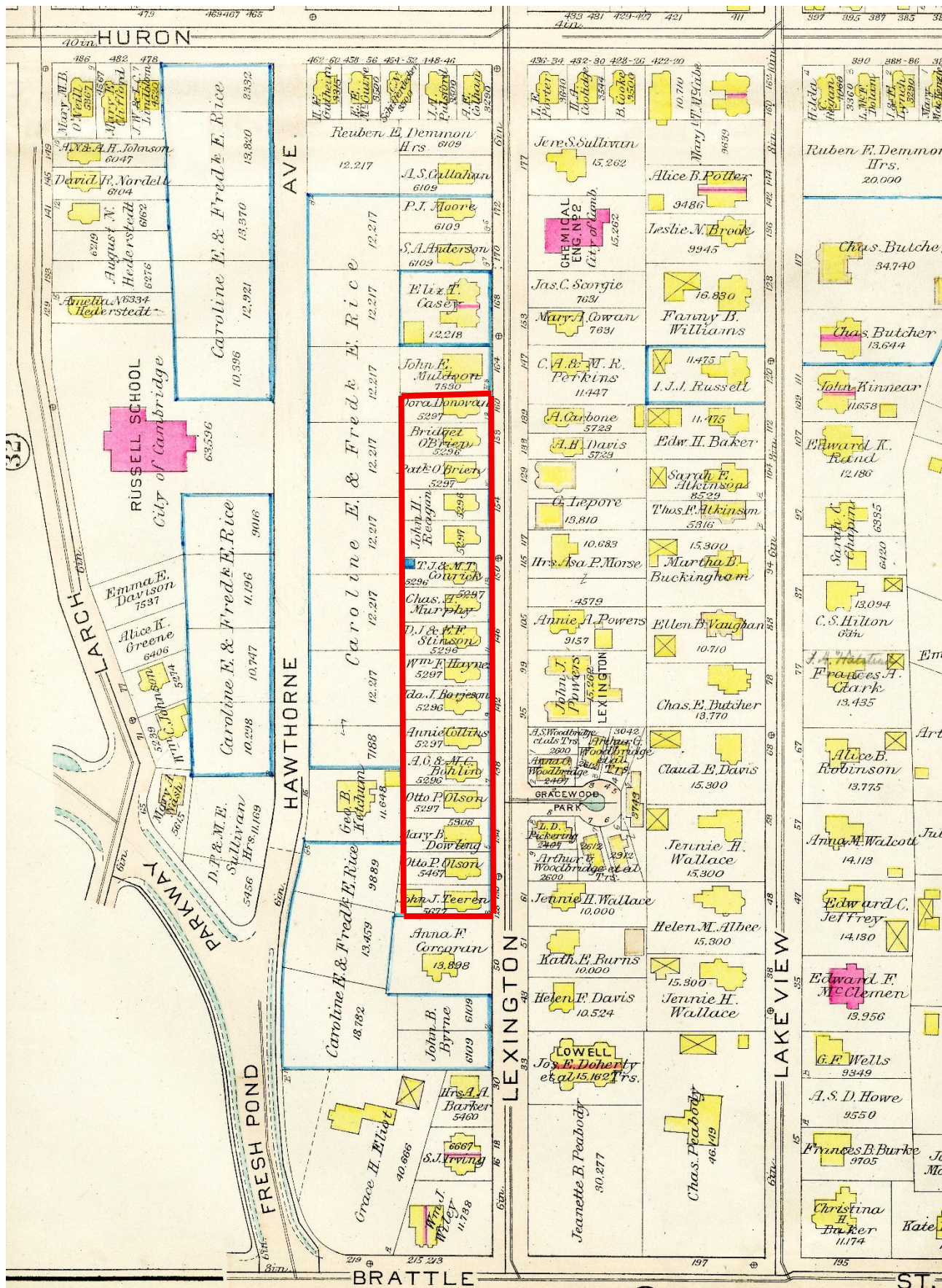
Lexington Avenue looking north from #118, 2009

CHC photo

Construction boomed in the remote fields north of Brattle Street after streetcar service began on Huron Avenue in 1894, in good time to attract the city's increasingly prosperous Irish-American households. As described in *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development*,

Lexington Avenue's eclectic mixture of two-family houses, three-deckers, and apartment buildings was quite different from the neighborhood envisioned in the 1880s. The 15,000-square foot lots were impractically large in the constrained economic environment of the 1890s. ... On the west side, builder John L. Malcolm replatted the old Niles and Rice subdivision into narrow, 5,000-square-foot lots and populated them with sixteen two and three-family gambrel-roofed houses.

John L. Malcolm, who was both owner and builder, and his architect, Elmer Buckley, created a cohesive collection of houses not seen elsewhere in Cambridge. Malcolm put up over fifty houses in West Cambridge between 1908 and 1916; Buckley was a builder and architect who was responsible for approximately 175 houses, mostly in West Cambridge, between 1897 and 1932. Their actual relationship is unclear; in one 1914 project, Buckley is designated as the architect and Malcolm the "mechanic" (builder). Very little biographical information is available on either man, except that both were born about 1877, listed their occupations as carpenter (and also as architect, in Buckley's case), and found steady work in Cambridge, Arlington, Medford and Somerville in the early 20th century.



Lexington Avenue in 1916. John L. Malcolm's development outlined in red.

Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by majority vote of the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of thirty registered voters. The effect of initiating a landmark designation study would be to establish the Commission's jurisdiction over the property for up to one year while a study is made of its suitability for permanent protection. At the conclusion of the study the Commission holds a public hearing to consider the findings of the landmark report and determine whether to recommend designation to the City Council. If the Council enacts the designation, the property remains under Commission jurisdiction, and no publicly visible alteration or construction could take place on the premises without the prior issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Nonapplicability, of Hardship.

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

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. (2.78.140)

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible properties as:

any property within the City being or containing a place, structure, feature or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures... (2.78.180.A)

Relationship to Criteria

The Malcolm houses are inherently "associated ... with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City" and "architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) ... in the context of a group of structures". As in other recent cases, the question before the Commission is whether the buildings should be considered for landmark designation "in balance with other City priorities such as affordable housing construction, environmental sustainability, and accessibility."

Discussion

The petitioners' contend that the Malcolm houses deserve protection as landmarks because "each has significance as they contribute to a truly unique, cohesive environment and demonstrate a uniformity of design not seen anywhere else in Cambridge." In fact, the present project does not disturb the uniformity of the streetscape. The additional density, however problematic on a street with limited parking already, responds to City Council goals. The Malcolm houses are a significant feature of Lexington Avenue, but protection should be sought either through amendments to the multifamily zoning or on a broader basis across West Cambridge.

Staff Recommendations

Staff recommends that the Commission decline to accept the petition and the request to initiate a landmark designation study.