

**PRELIMINARY  
LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT**

**Cheney Read House  
135 Western Avenue  
Cambridge, Mass.**



The 1846 Cheney Read House is the only surviving Greek Revival house with a monumental two-story portico in Cambridgeport and one of only a few buildings of this type in Cambridge. The house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. The house is the most recognizable house on Western Avenue, a busy arterial road linking Cambridge and Boston.

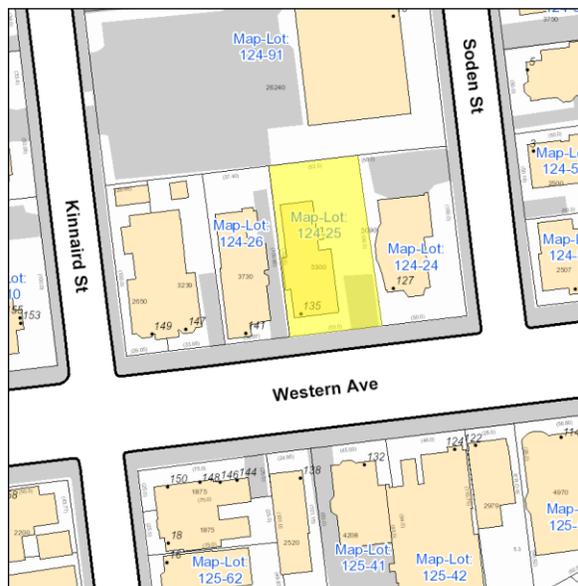
The house retains much of its original building fabric and has been restored by a previous owner with the help of preservation grants. However, it is currently unprotected from inappropriate alterations. Designation of the house by the City Council as a Cambridge landmark would protect the exterior of this fine home for the public to view and enjoy for years to come.

Sarah Burks  
Cambridge Historical Commission  
August 1, 2016

## Location and Status

### **A. Address and Zoning**

The Cheney Read house at 135 Western Avenue occupies a 5,300 square foot lot (Map 124/Parcel 25) on the north side of Western between Kinnaird and Soden streets. The zoning is Residence C-1, a multi-family district that allows for .75 FAR with a height limit of 35' and a requirement of 1,500 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit. The building is non-conforming in its setbacks along the west side. The assessed value in 2016 was \$1,147,500,200, of which \$696,200 was attributed to the building.



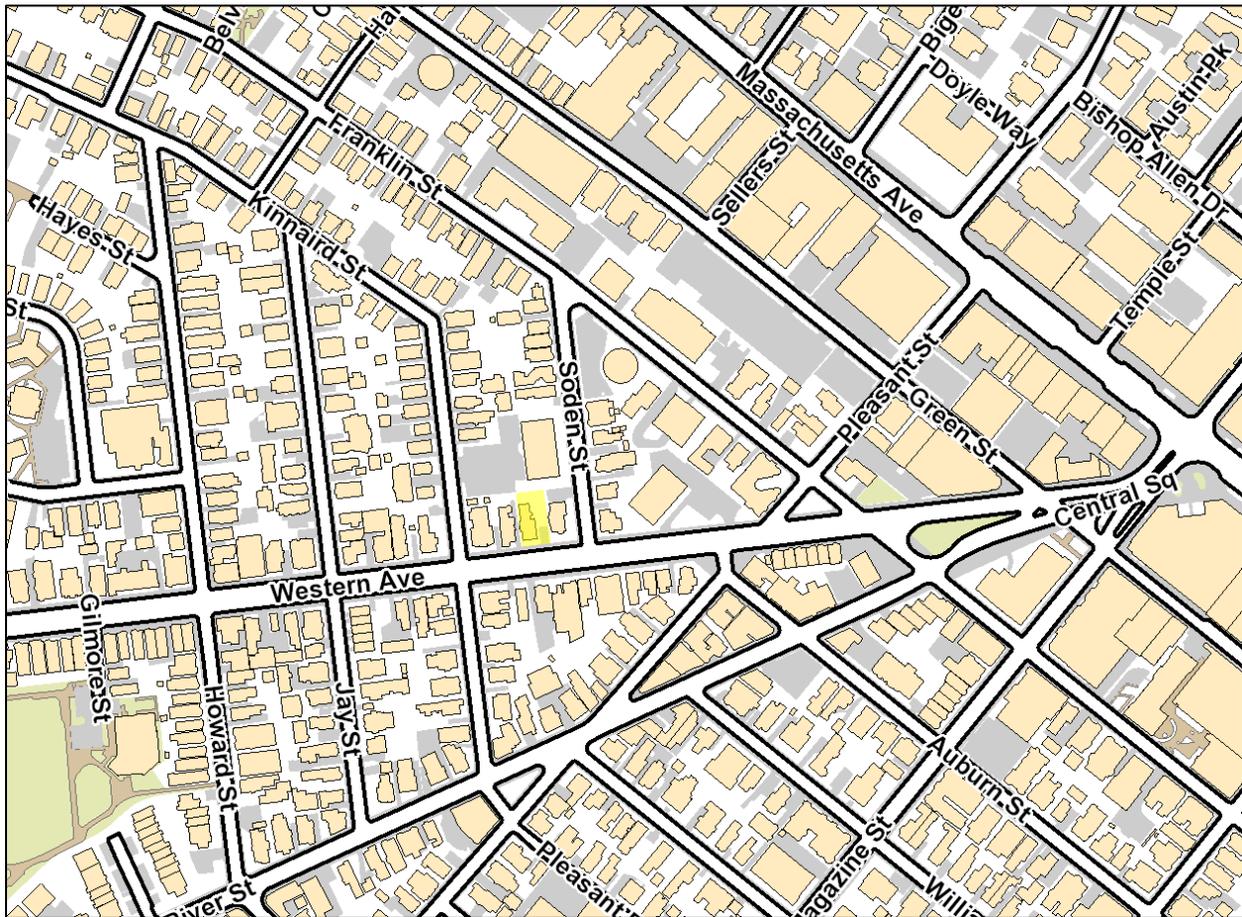
135 Western Avenue, July 28, 2016

CHC staff photo

### **B. Ownership and Occupancy**

The Cambridge Assessing Department's public online database still lists the owner of record as Alan L. Johnson c/o Bluepower LLC in Newton. However, Mr. Johnson sold the property in February 2015 to the LLC (Middlesex South Registry of Deeds Bk 64968 / Pg 228). The owner

contact we were able to establish last year was Steve Day at 55 Hagan Road in Newton, Mass. The structure is assessed as a two-family house.



Environs of 135 Western Avenue

Cambridge GIS

### C. Area Description

Western Avenue was originally called the Watertown Road and was laid out from Central Square to the new bridge that opened in 1824. The Riverside neighborhood north of Western Avenue was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century on lands originally held by the Dana family. Much of the area developed slowly due to the marshy, poorly drained condition of the land. Development first clustered along Green and Pleasant streets and near the river, where the 1838 Cambridge almshouse was converted to the Riverside Press in 1852. After the Civil War, the continued growth of the Riverside Press and the filling of the former millpond, where Hoyt Field is now located, helped improve conditions and opened the area to further residential development.

### D. Context of this Designation Report

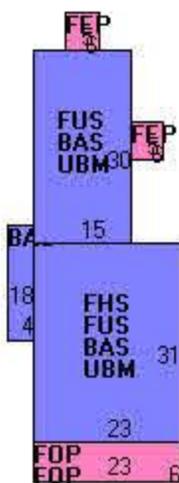
The Cheney Read house was identified during the Cambridge Historical Commission's 1965 survey of Cambridgeport as having exceptional significance, and the Commission nominated it for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It was listed individually and as part of the

Cambridge multiple resource area in 1982. The home was owned for many years by the Johnson family. Alan Johnson, a previous owner, was an employee of the MBTA and a longtime resident of the neighborhood. He applied for and received three preservation grants for exterior restoration of the house in FY 2006 and FY 2007. This represents a considerable public investment that should be protected.

## I. Description

The Read house is a three bay, gable-roofed 2½-story Greek Revival-style house with a full-width 2-story Ionic columned portico across the front with broad corner pilasters. The front wall and gable end have a smooth flush board surface. The entrance is located in the left bay and consists of a paneled door with sidelights and transom. The door is framed by an elaborate pediment and pilasters. The tall casement windows on the first floor of the façade open easily onto the porch. Elsewhere, the house has 6-over-6 double hung windows. The windows are capped with pedimented lintels on all sides of the structure. The full pediment of the gable projects over the front porch and the window in the gable end features a pronounced drip molding. The visible portion of the foundation wall is brick.

This example conveys all the grandeur of the style despite the rather small dimensions of the house itself. The front block of the house measures 23' across by 31' deep. The 2-story ell is off center and measures 15' by 30'. A one-story enclosed basement stair is located on the west side of the house. Some irregularities of the design indicate that the builder was more practically minded than wed to classical proportions and symmetry. The windows are not quite centered between the columns of the portico and the roof pitch is steeper than the pattern book examples, which provides just a little more headroom to the quarters on the second floor. The door surround has been squeezed into the narrow space between the pilaster and the lintel of the center window. But it all works together to dramatic effect.



Building plan,  
Assessing Department



Entrance detail

CHC staff photo

Exterior alterations have been few. A one-story enclosed basement stair was added on the west side in 1897 by owner William C. Carroll, a painter. The front gable end window was changed to 2-over-2 sash in the mid twentieth century but was restored to its original configuration as part of the 2006-2007 restoration. Likewise, the asbestos shingle siding that covered the house for many years was removed and the clapboards and flush boards restored. The house is remarkably intact and maintains its historic integrity with its original details and traditional materials.



135 Western Avenue, July 28, 2016

CHC staff photo

## II. History and Significance of the Property

Sarah Dana platted a subdivision in 1833 and sold lot 7 to William M. Hyde in 1846. Hyde, a carpenter, built the house with some financial assistance from his father, Thaddeus Hyde of Newton. The Dana family regulated the development of its lands through deed restrictions preventing the pursuit of numerous trades within the neighborhood. The prohibited trades included butcher, currier, tanner, varnish maker, ink maker, tallow chandler, soap boiler, brewer, distiller, sugar baker, dyer, tinman, working brazier, founder, smith, and brickmaker. These occupations were considered either a nuisance or a danger to the neighboring properties.

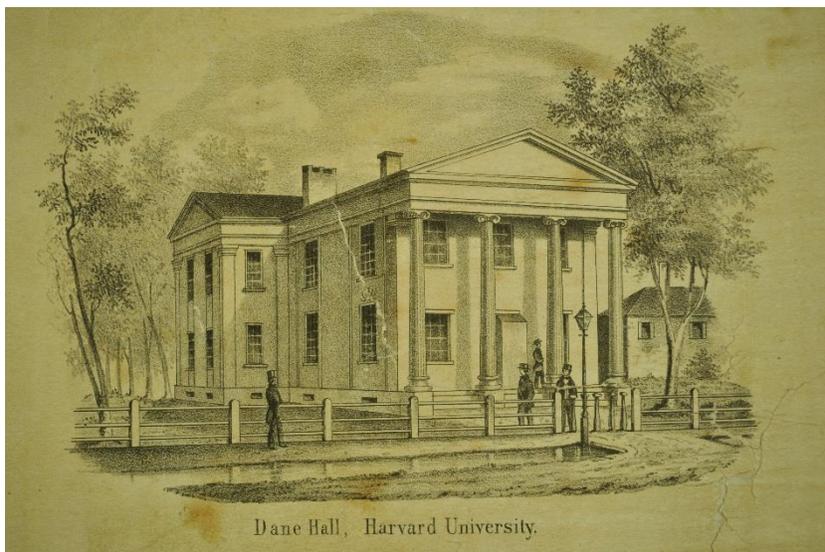
William Marshall Hyde was born in 1818 in Newton, Massachusetts to Thaddeus Hyde, a farmer, and Sarah D. White. He was one of five children. There are no other known houses built by him in Cambridge. He must have had an adventurous spirit that took him west because he next shows up in the 1880 federal census living in Franklin, Louisiana. He had married Eliza, a native of Louisiana, and settled there with his family. Another brother ended up in California.

The 1846 Cheney Read house was the most high style Greek Revival home built south of Massachusetts Avenue and the only house of this style in Cambridgeport with a two-story temple front with a projecting pediment and full front portico. The house has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1982.

The first resident of the home, Cheney Read, purchased the home from Thaddeus Hyde in 1848. Read was a skilled joiner employed in Charles Davenport's railroad car manufactory on Main Street. Read transitioned from that finishing the interior of rail cars to making pianoforte cases in a Boston factory by 1850. He only lived in the house a few years before moving out of Cambridge in 1851.

The house was then purchased by Timothy Newell, a painter, who resided next door at 127 Western Avenue. Newell held the property until 1867 when he sold it to Sarah L. Walker. Thomas O. Walker was a bookseller. His shop grew into a circulating library and then a stationery business.

Subsequent owners included William and Ellen Carroll. William owned a painting business. One of their sons, James, continued in that line of work and was also a paperhanger. Gaston Wilder, was an engineer at the Cambridge Gas Light Company. He and his wife, Sylona, a seamstress, owned the home in the mid twentieth century. Mrs. Wilder willed the home to her caretaker and neighbor, Mary Alice Johnson.



Dane Hall, built 1832; cross gable wing added 1844.  
Illustration from Walling's Map of Cambridge, 1854.

The arrival of the Greek Revival style of architecture is described in the forthcoming publication, *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* by Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan,

The discovery of the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum had spurred interest in Roman classical architecture. New finds in Greece and illustrated books such as Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, a four-volume collection of their measured drawings of ancient temples published between 1762-1818, inspired architects and designers to adopt Greek forms for their buildings, furniture, and decoration. In addition, the Greek war of independence from Turkey (1821-30) recalled for Americans their own recent struggle for freedom and found support among intellectuals in the Boston area. Coinciding with a period of tremendous growth in population in Massachusetts, the Greek Revival and its local variants dominated residential architecture in the 1830s and 1840s and seemed to resolve the country's desire for a democratic, national style.

The first local example of the style appeared on Harvard's campus with Dane Hall in 1832. Another example closer to Western Avenue was the Cambridge town hall on the corner of Norfolk and Harvard streets, built in 1832 to a design of architect Asher Benjamin. The building burned in 1853. The specifications and other written descriptions of the building inform us of its Greek Revival design, but no illustrations of the building have been found other than a sketch of the plan showing the columns of the porticos on both front and back. The style was successfully used for residential buildings in Cambridge including the Joseph Lovering house at 38 Kirkland Street (1839 by Oliver Hastings and Luther Brooks) and the Gannett House (1838) built for Omen Keith.

The use of this formal style on Western Avenue in Cambridgeport, speaks of the optimism of the builder and the entrepreneurs of the still developing neighborhood for Cambridgeport as a successful commercial area and the hopes for Western Avenue as a new street for prominent homes.



Joseph Lovering house, 38 Kirkland Street, built 1839.  
C. Sullivan photo, 2009.

#### **IV. Relationship to the Criteria**

##### **A. Criteria for Landmark Designation**

The enabling ordinance for landmark designation states:

The Historical Commission by majority vote may recommend for designation as a landmark 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 its 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 . . . (City Code, Article III, Chapter 2.78.180.A)

##### **B. Relationship of Property to Criteria**

The Cheney Read house is architecturally significant under Criterion 2 as an important and intact example of its period and the Greek Revival style in Cambridge and the only remaining example in Cambridgeport of a Greek Revival house with a two-story portico. The house was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 for these reasons. The high level of historic architectural integrity retained in this house and its prominent visibility on a highly traveled roadway are additional supporting reasons why this property should be designated a landmark.



135 Western Avenue, ca. 1950.

CHC file photo



Western Avenue looking east, 1970. (#135 at far left)

CHC file photo

## **V. Recommendations**

### **A. Article III, Chapter 2.78.140**

The purpose of landmark designation is contained in the enabling ordinance, which is to:

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of . . . sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; [and] to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such . . . structures . . .

### **B. Preservation Options**

Landmark designation or donation of a preservation easement are the only two options for the permanent long-term protection and preservation of the Cheney Read house. National Register listing alone will not permanently protect and preserve the building.

### **C. Staff Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Commission find that the Cheney Read house is eligible for landmark designation as defined in the ordinance for the reasons stated above and should be a protected landmark under Article III, Chapter 2.78.

The house maintains a commanding presence on Western Avenue, a major arterial street, and contributes greatly to the architectural character of the neighborhood. The Commission awarded three preservation grants totaling \$60,000 for exterior restoration of the house in FY 2006 and FY 2007. This represents a considerable public investment that should be protected.

If implemented by the City Council, landmark designation would allow the Commission to review and approve publicly-visible exterior alterations with the goal of protecting the historic integrity of the building and its setting. The designation would not regulate use or alterations to interior features.

### **VI. Standards and Criteria**

Under Article III, the Historical Commission is charged with reviewing any construction, demolition or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features (other than color) of a designated landmark. This section of the report describes exterior architectural features that are among the characteristics that led to consideration of the property as a landmark. Except as the order designating or amending the landmark may otherwise provide, the exterior architectural features described in this report should be preserved and/or enhanced in any proposed alteration or construction that affects those features of the landmark. The standards following in paragraphs A and B of this section provide guidelines for the treatment of the landmark described in this report.

#### **A. General Standards and Criteria**

Subject to review and approval of exterior architectural features under the terms of this report, the following standards shall apply:

1. Significant historic and architectural features of the landmark should be preserved.
2. Changes and additions to the landmark which have taken place over time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right and, if so, that significance should be recognized and respected.
3. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced.
4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.
5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture, and appearance. The use of imitation replacement materials is generally discouraged.

6. The surface cleaning of a landmark should be done by the gentlest possible means. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that damage exterior architectural features shall not be used.
7. Additions should not destroy significant exterior architectural features and should not be incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinct character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.
8. Additions should be designed in a way that, if they were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the landmark would be unimpaired.

## B. Suggested Review Guidelines

### 1. Site Development.

Additions to the Read Cheney house, if allowed, should respect the form, massing and materials of the original without slavishly imitating it.

Alterations to publicly visible landscape structures, including walls, fences, paths, driveways, and the like, should be compatible with the original design and materials.

### 2. Alterations

#### a. Exterior surfaces

Exterior materials should be preserved insofar as practicable. Special care should be taken to protect and maintain the appearance of the wood cladding and trim. Care should be taken when cleaning or repointing the brick foundation walls to use gentle cleaning methods and appropriate mortar mix and pointing profile.

#### b. Fenestration

Introduction of new window openings on the visible facades should not be allowed. Existing sash should be maintained, but when replaced should conform to the original design of the wood sash as closely as possible. Storm windows may be installed or upgraded without review in conformance with current Commission guidelines.

#### c. Interior features

Although interior features are not subject to the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Historical Commission, the owner should be encouraged to preserve original spaces, materials and detailing.

#### d. Secondary Structures

The concrete front steps and wood fences are not original. If replaced, new materials and design should be appropriate to the historic character of the property. Fencing at the front sidewalk should be kept low enough so that views of the portico are not obstructed.

## **VII. Proposed Order**

That the Cheney Read House, 135 Western Avenue, be designated as a protected landmark pursuant to Chapter 2.78, Article III, Section 2.78.180 of the Code of the City of Cambridge, as recommended by vote of the Cambridge Historical Commission on \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_, 2016. The premises so designated is the land defined as parcel 25 on assessor's map 124 and the structures thereon and the premises described in a deed recorded in Book 64968, Page 228 at the South Middlesex Registry of Deeds.

This designation is justified by the high level of architectural significance exhibited by the structure which is an important and intact example of its period and the Greek Revival style in Cambridge and the only remaining example in Cambridgeport of a Greek Revival house with a two-story portico.

The effect of this designation shall be that review by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Non-Applicability shall be required before any construction activity can take place within the designated premises or any action can be taken affecting the appearance of the premises, that would in either case be visible from a public way. In making determinations, the Commission shall be guided by the terms of the Final Landmark Designation Report, dated \_\_\_\_\_, 2016 with respect to the designated premises, by Section VII, Standards and Criteria of said report, and by the applicable sections of Chapter 2.78, Article III, of the Cambridge Municipal Code.