

4:00 PM June 27, 2.

Proposed Landmark Designation  
for the  
Francis-Allyn House, 1564 Massachusetts Avenue

Cambridge Historical Commission  
May 7, 1981

## Landmark Designation Report

### Francis-Allyn House, 1564 Massachusetts Avenue

#### I. Location

The Francis-Allyn House is located at 1564 Massachusetts Avenue in Old Cambridge, on parcel 13, assessors plan 172. The lot on which the house is located runs between Massachusetts Avenue and Follen Street; it is approximately 77 feet wide, and between 104 and 122 feet deep, containing 8,675 square feet. It is located in the immediate vicinity of Cambridge Common, facing a triangular park known as the "little Common". The structure is one of the few surviving houses on this section of Massachusetts Avenue, an area formerly of large, free-standing houses but now characterized by apartment buildings and institutional uses. It is in a residential C-3 zoning district. The owner is Stephen Bell, of 20 Royal Street, Waltham, Massachusetts.

#### II. Description

The Francis-Allyn House was built in 1831 and is a wood frame, clapboarded structure of 2 1/2 stories in a vernacular Greek Revival style. It is a two and one-half story wood structure with a shingled pitched roof set on a granite foundation. The building consists of the main house placed gable end to Massachusetts Avenue, an intermediate offset ell, and a second narrow ell running back to Follen Street.

The Greek Revival features of the house consist of a pilastered entrance and a pedimented gable end. The house

formerly possessed a one story porch running the full length of its south facade. This feature was removed in fairly recent times, but the floor-to-ceiling height triple-hung windows which once gave access to it are still in place. The pilasters flanking the entrance still feature a modified Greek key design, but the triangular pediment above the entrance is a disfiguring modern addition which apparently replaced an entablature. The uncharacteristically narrow corner pilasters appear to be an original feature, and there is no evidence of capitals. The six-light sash which occur throughout the house appear to be original. The site contains several mature deciduous trees, but no other exceptional plantings. The Follen Street end of the lot is paved and unfenced.

The property is flanked on both sides by five story brick apartment buildings built in the Georgian Revival style between 1915 and 1930. Across Massachusetts Avenue and the "little Common", the house faces the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church in the Old Cambridge Historic District, academic buildings of the Harvard Law School, and two Mansard houses recently nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, 1581-83 and 1587 Massachusetts Avenue. Follen Street, to the rear of the Francis-Allyn House, is a low-density neighborhood of single family houses, of which five are listed or nominated to the National Register.

### III. History of the Property

Massachusetts Avenue was laid out in the earliest days of Newtowne as a 100 foot wide right of way and connected the county seat in Harvard Square with the towns of Middlesex County and southern New Hampshire. Houses on Cambridge Common and Massachusetts Avenue were relatively modest until well into the 19th century; Cambridge's elite lived on Brattle Street or closer to Harvard Square. In the period after 1830, however, a few houses in the Greek Revival style began to be built in the neighborhood north of the Common; many were first occupied by professors at Harvard, and the Francis-Allyn House dates from this period. Massachusetts Avenue (then known as North Avenue) became a prestigious residential street after the opening in 1843 of the Fitchburg Railroad passenger station in Porter Square gave rapid access to Boston. The horsecar route which opened in 1856 reinforced this new status, and the Mansard style mansions which soon lined North Avenue from Porter's Station to Harvard Square were generally built for Boston businessmen.

The Francis-Allyn House was built in 1831 by Oliver Hastings, the Cambridge housewright, and on completion in 1832 was sold to Mary Foster. Mary Foster sold the house in 1846 to Convers Francis, who was later the Parkman Professor of Pulpit Eloquence and Pastoral Care at Harvard University. John Allyn, the Boston bookseller and founder of the publishing house of Allyn and Bacon, occupied the house during the early 1880's. Later owners have not been determined; in the twentieth century, the house was divided and until 1980

contained five apartments. It has now been reconverted to owner occupancy and the number of units reduced to less than four.

#### IV. Significance

##### A. Historic Associations

The significant historical associations of the house at 1564 Massachusetts Avenue are with Convers Francis and John Allyn, who were both well known figures of their day. In addition, however, the house is significant for its relationship with Cambridge Common and Massachusetts Avenue, two major features in the development of Cambridge. It is one of a handful of properties which retain the single-family residential scale which characterized both the Common and the Avenue until the twentieth century. Cambridge Common is the historic center of the City, and has been the site of numerous historic events associated with the founding of the colony, the American revolution, and the development of Cambridge as an internationally important center of education. The Common itself, and most of the properties facing it, have been protected by inclusion in an historic district since 1963. The objectives of this historic district have been to protect the Common from demolition or inappropriate change of the significant buildings surrounding it.

Similarly, Massachusetts Avenue until the early twentieth century was a monumental street lined for a half mile with large, free-standing mansions. Much of this character has disappeared, and only seven significant 19th century houses

remain on the Avenue.

### B. Architectural Significance

The architectural significance of the Francis-Allyn House lies in the importance of its builder, Oliver Hastings. Unfortunately, the house itself has been stripped of its major distinguishing features. Hastings (1791-1879) was one of the most accomplished builder-designers of his day, and was best known for his development of the broad-pilastered Regency variation of the Greek Revival style. Born in Lexington, he built his first house in Cambridge in 1828 for Dr. John T. G. Nichols at 63 Brattle Street. His later houses include the Joseph Lovering House at 38 Kirkland Street (1839), the Luther Brooks House at 34 Kirkland Street (1840), his own house at 101 Brattle Street (1844), the Judge Daniel Wells House at 170 Brattle Street (1852), the John A. Henshaw House at 23 Craigie Street (1855), and the Henry Ware House at 8 Berkeley Street (1860).

Of the fourteen houses Hastings is known to have built in Cambridge, eight are listed or nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

The house at 1564 Massachusetts Avenue was Hastings' fifth house in Cambridge and illustrates the transition between the Federal and Greek Revival styles. Bainbridge Bunting, Survey Director of the Historical Commission, characterized the house as follows in 1968:

This is a relatively early Greek Revival for a Cambridge vernacular house and it retains much of the lightness of the late Federal; this is seen especially in the corner boards (which are not pilasters) and the horizontal cornice which is not applied with the usual frieze and architrave

to make it a complete entablature. The only Greek Revival details for sure are the pilasters which enframe the entrance, though the door frame here is itself late Federal.

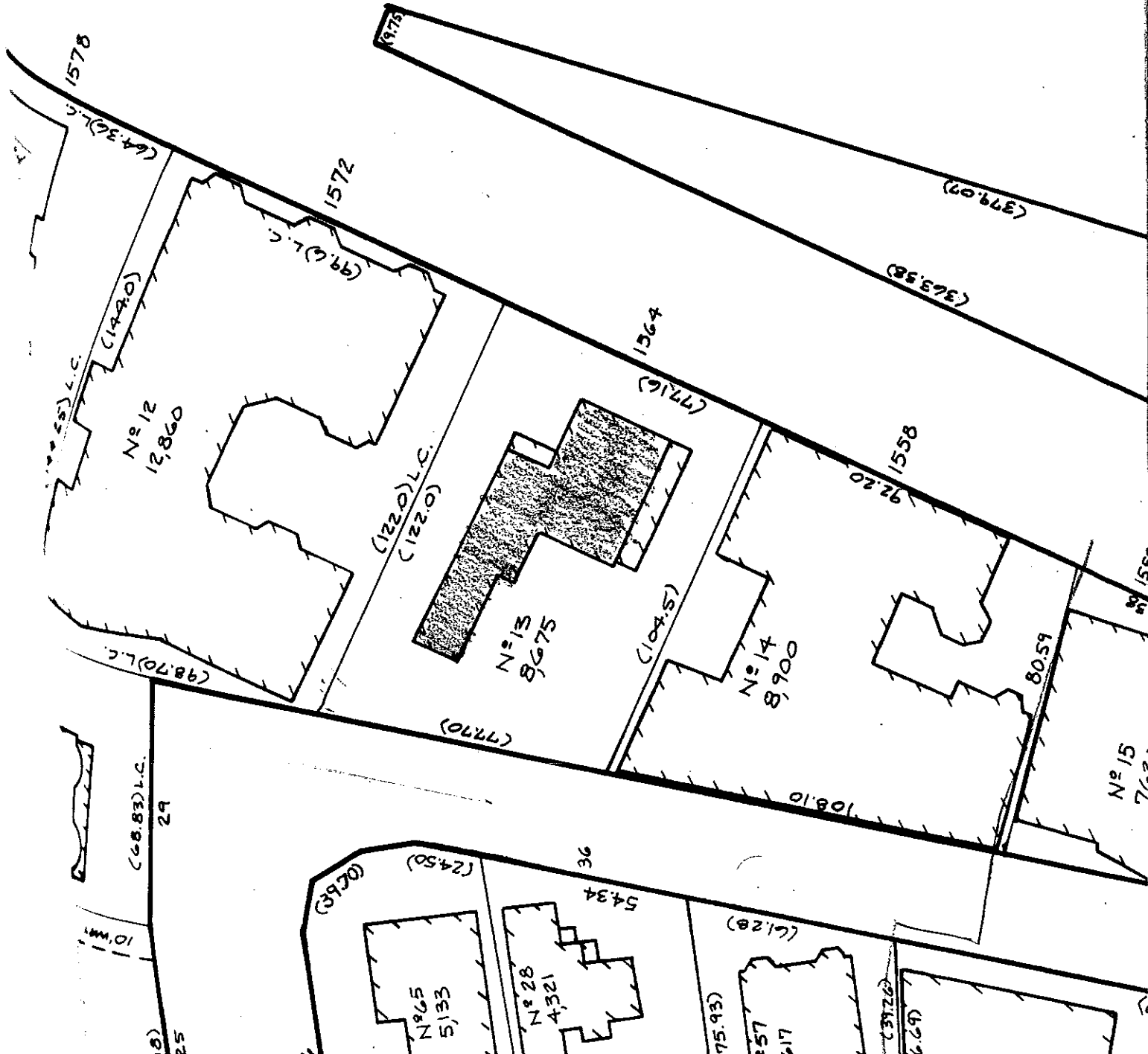
In addition to its associations with Hastings, the house is a significant feature of the surroundings of Cambridge Common. Although its setting has been affected by the construction of apartment houses on both the north and south, the house retains enough of its original earlier integrity that its preservation is desirable.

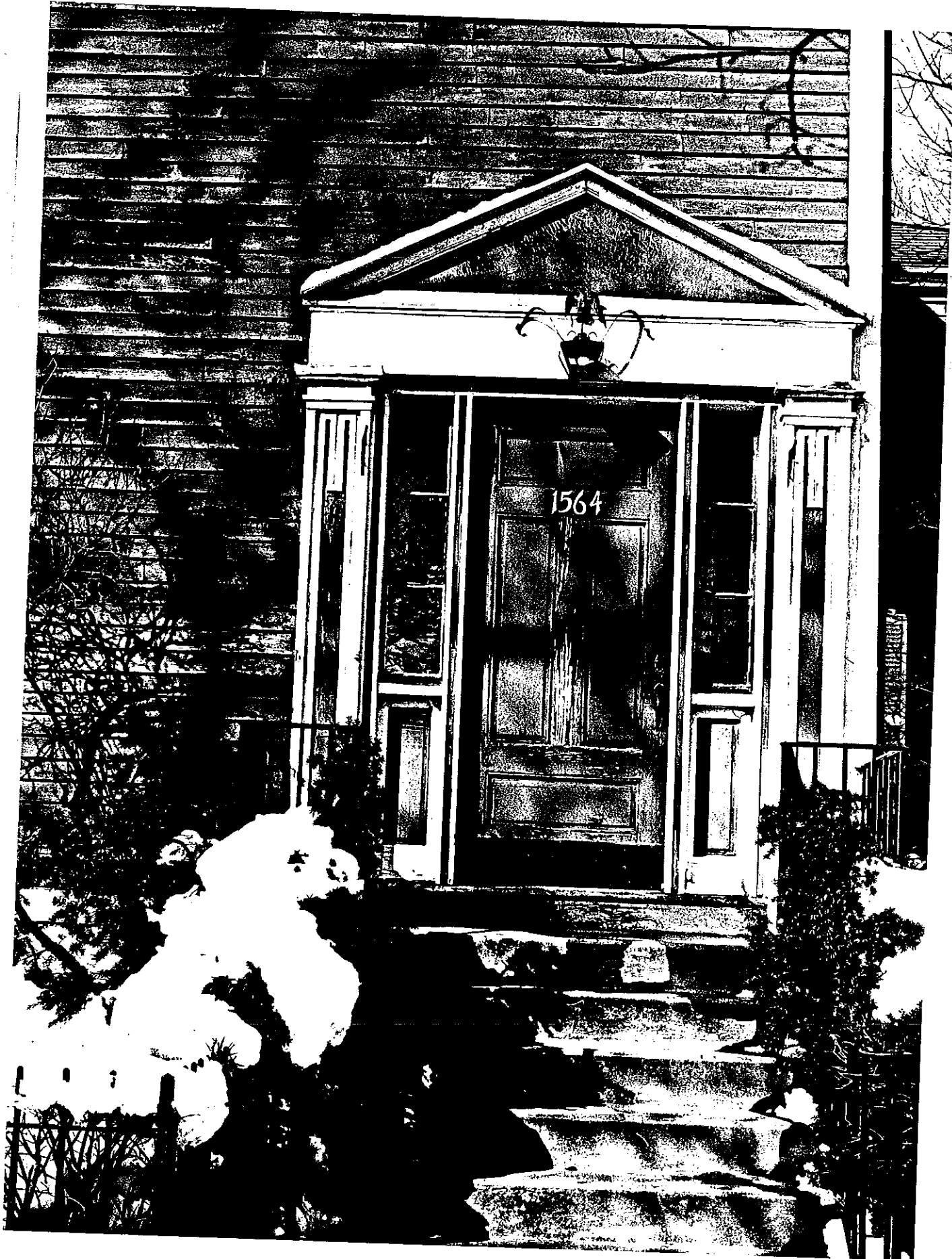
#### V. Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

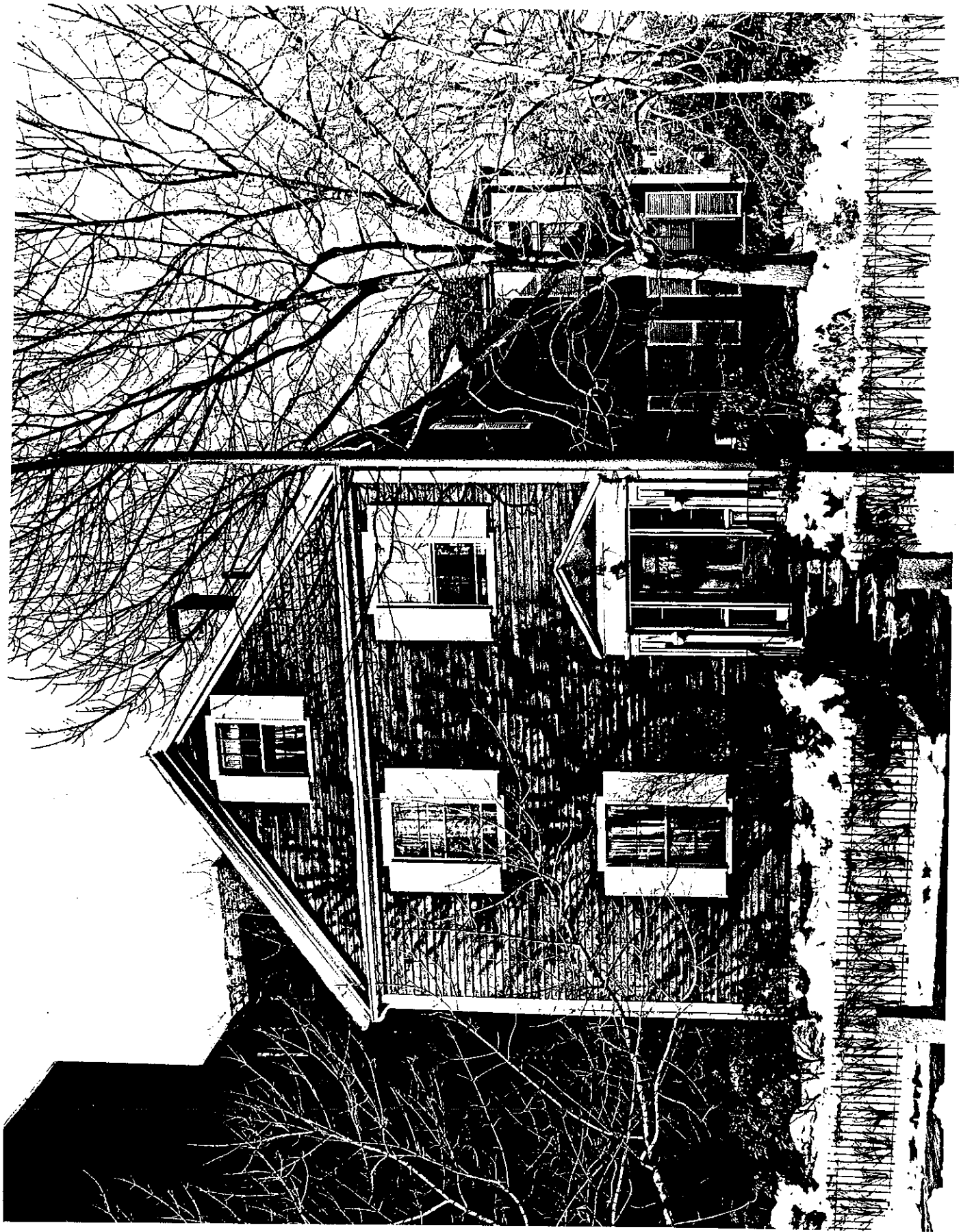
The Francis-Allyn House clearly meets the criteria for designation as a landmark under paragraph 4 of the ordinance governing establishment of neighborhood conservation districts and protected landmarks. It is a structure "importantly associated with one or more historic persons", Convers Francis and John Allyn, and with "the broad architectural ... [or] cultural history of the City" through its relationship with Cambridge Common and 19th century North Avenue. Furthermore, it is "historically ... significant (in terms of ... association with a famous builder)". Its later alterations, while unfortunate, do not detract from its associations or from its importance in the setting of Cambridge Common.

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MASSACHUSETTS







1564 Massachusetts Avenue

B. Orr photograph, winter 1965-66, negative #C20N2A2 7

Chronology of Historical Commission Actions With Regard To

1564 Massachusetts Avenue, A Designated Landmark

- January 13, 1981 Owner submits application for demolition permit
- February 5, 1981 Historical Commission (HC) determines building is significant and preferably preserved. This results in six months delay in demolition permit under Demolition Ordinance 909 (now 965)
- April 2, 1981 HC receives petition with 1,600 names supporting designation as landmark under Landmark Ordinance 953 (now 1002)
- June 25, 1981 HC makes recommendation to designate, specifically providing for new construction on the site
- June 29, 1981 City Council designates building as landmark by 7-1 vote
- April 20, 1982 HC's architects committee meets to review preliminary plans
- April 28, 1982 Building damaged by fire
- May 6, 1982 HC approves Certificate of Appropriateness (subject to review of architects committee) for renovation of building to three units and construction of five townhouses on Follen Street, allowing demolition of north wing and ell
- May 27, 1982 Second fire damages building
- July 6, 1983 Building Department issues permit for partial demolition, as allowed by HC. No demolition occurs within six months
- November 3, 1983 New application filed for revised plan reducing number of townhouses from five to three, but otherwise similar to plan of May, 1982. Application requests "partial demolition of the existing structure" and "restoration of existing building according to (specified) plans"
- November 28, 1983 HC grants Certificate of Appropriateness allowing "demolition of rear ell and north wing of existing building", subject to review by architects committee of facade details and colors
- April 24, 1984 HC's architects committee meets and approves facade changes, including change from three garage doors on Follen Street to one entrance, as permitted by below grade parking scheme
- May 1, 1984

May 14, 1984 Application filed for building permit; project described as involving partial demolition of existing structure, additions to the existing structure, plus three units of new construction

May 21, 1984 HC's Executive Director approves plans, except for certain exterior details

June 14, 1984 Structure demolished; Building Commissioner issues stop-work order

June 14, 1984 City Manager refers demolition issue back to HC

June 25, 1984 City Council orders tabling of further action until HC report on recommendations for Council action

June 28, 1984 HC public hearing

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