



# CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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November 29, 2018

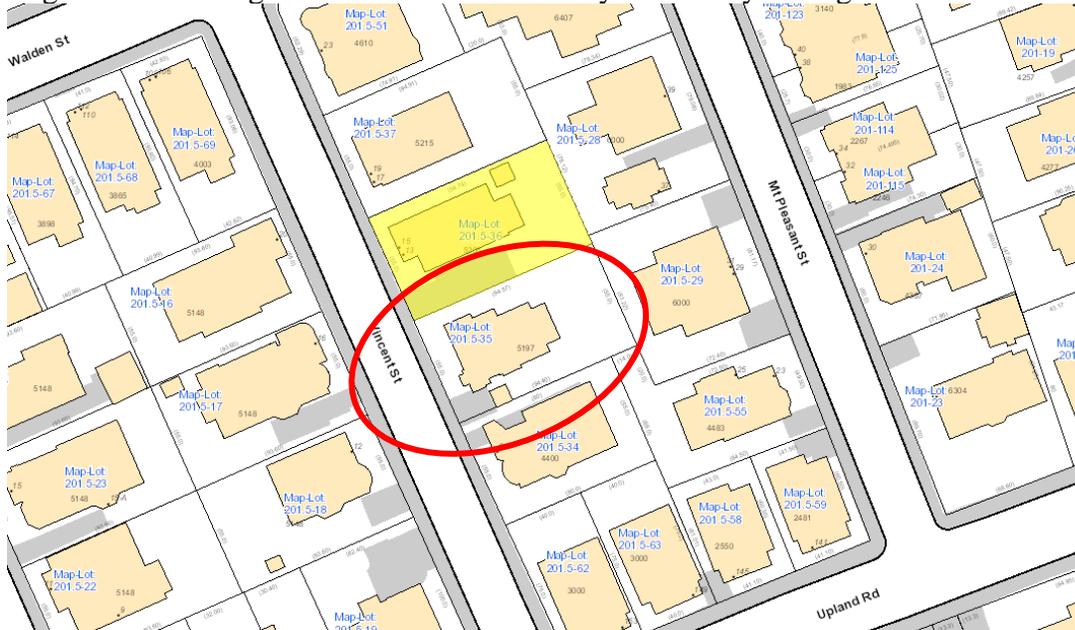
To: Members of the Historical Commission  
From: Charles Sullivan  
Re: Landmark Evaluation: Nelson-Byars house, 13-15 Vincent Street (1924)

An application to demolish the structure at 13-15 Vincent Street was received on May 17, 2018. On June 7 the Commission found the house to be significant and preferably preserved in the context of the proposed replacement project. The applicant, Matt Hayes, appeared at Commission meetings on July 12 and September 6, but the Commission did not find the revised designs acceptable and declined to terminate the demolition delay.

The Commission’s practice is to hold a hearing in the fifth month of the delay period to evaluate the potential of the structure for landmark designation. This hearing was omitted from the November agenda and is now scheduled for December 6. The demolition delay runs out on December 9.

## Description

The Nelson-Byars house is a two-story side-hall house with a gable roof built in 1924. The original wood-shingled exterior is concealed by white vinyl siding. The roof is covered with



13-15 Vincent Street.

Cambridge GIS, Assessor’s map

asphalt shingles. The foundation is concrete block. A driveway is located to the south of the house. All the windows appear to have been replaced. The shingled simplicity of the house as originally constructed owes more to the Bungalow style than to any other. The principal feature of the facade, the enclosed two-story porch, may have been built as an open porch.



13-15 Vincent Street. June 2013.

Assessing Dept. photo



15 Vincent Street, 1973

CHC photo

Vincent Street was laid out in 1888 and initially built up with substantial Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses. Development ceased with the Panic of 1893 and did not resume until after WWI, when the market favored less-expensive two-family houses in the much less elaborate Bungalow style. The adjoining vacant lots at 13-15 and 17-19 Vincent, along with four more at 106-108 through 120 Walden Street, were filled with two-family houses in 1925-25. Although the two 1924-25 houses on Vincent are similar, they were put up by different owners and by different designers.

The owner proposes to demolish the house and construct two attached single-family houses with off-street parking.

### Significance

The house at 13-15 Vincent is a simple house that displays some characteristics of the Bungalow style. Although no attempt has been made to quantify the prevalence of this style in North and West Cambridge, there appear to be several dozen examples nearby.

The Nelson-Byars house changed hands repeatedly before George E. Byars Jr. acquired it in 1957. Byars, who lived in the house until his death in 1997, was a WWII veteran who entered the Cambridge Fire Department in 1951 and retired as a Lieutenant in 1979. He also worked as a housing code inspector for the Cambridge Health Department and the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority and founded the Cambridge chapter of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters.

### Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by 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 ten registered voters.

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)

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted 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 neighborhoods, 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; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or

structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work.  
(2.78.140)

### Relationship to Criteria

The Nelson-Byars house could be considered to meet criterion (1) for its associations with the economic and social history of Cambridge. The staff does not consider it to meet criterion (2) as “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.”

### Staff Recommendations

The Nelson-Byars house is a modest example of early 20<sup>th</sup> century tract house construction that appears as an anomaly among its Queen Anne and Colonial Revival neighbors on Vincent Street. Its primary significance derives from its association with Lieutenant Byars, who is commemorated by a city marker at the Lafayette Square fire station. Replacement with a house of contemporary design would not necessarily have a substantial adverse effect on its surroundings.

While Nelson-Byars house was found to be significant for the purposes of the demolition delay ordinance, it does not rise to the level of significance warranting designation as a Cambridge landmark. I recommend that the Commission take no action to initiate a designation study.

cc: Matt Hayes