



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: September 24, 2015

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: Case D-1374, 136-138 Cushing Street / 6 Vineyard Street (ca. 1843)

An application to demolish the building at 136-138 Cushing Street (with an alternate address for 138 Cushing as 6 Vineyard Street) was received on September 9. The applicant, MacArthur Construction Company, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for October 1.



Wyeth Tenant House, 136-138 Cushing Street

Cambridge Assessing Department



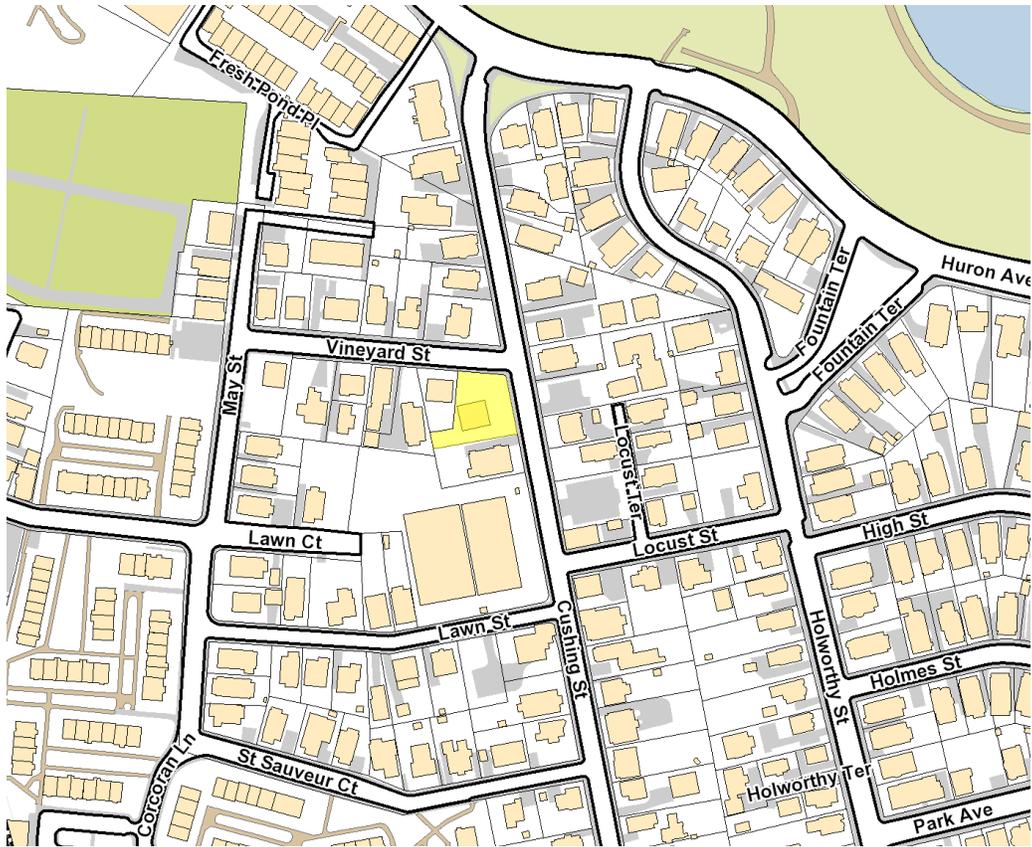
Wyeth Tenant House, Vineyard Street elevation

CHC Staff Photo

The Wyeth tenant house occupies an 8,441 square foot lot (Map 256, Parcel 85) on the west side of Cushing Street and south side of Vineyard Street in the Strawberry Hill neighborhood. It contains one residential unit and one non-residential unit (chapel and club rooms). The property was assessed at \$701,500 and just sold for \$1.15M. The zoning is Residence B, a residence-only zone, which allows two-family and townhouse construction. The district permits an FAR of 0.35 and requires a minimum of 2,500 square feet lot area per dwelling unit. The district has a height limit of 35 feet. The redevelopment proposal calls for two detached 2½ story, single-family homes.

The existing double house was built between 1837 and 1843. It is a 1½-story frame structure with the gable end facing Cushing Street. The double house was originally designed with a center party wall perpendicular to Cushing Street and front doors on the opposite north and south walls. The north wall (facing Vineyard Street) retains the original five-bay center-entrance form. The plan of the southern half was altered significantly in 1933 when the Santa Lucia Society moved the entrance to face Cushing Street and converted the south side into a chapel on the first floor and a meeting room in the basement.

The building exterior, once clapboarded, is covered with artificial siding. The foundation is parged and appears to be in good condition. The frame and roof appear sound, with no obvious structural issues. A mature maple tree is located on the northeast portion of the lot.



Strawberry Hill neighborhood

Cambridge GIS



136-138 Cushing Street

Cambridge GIS

Context

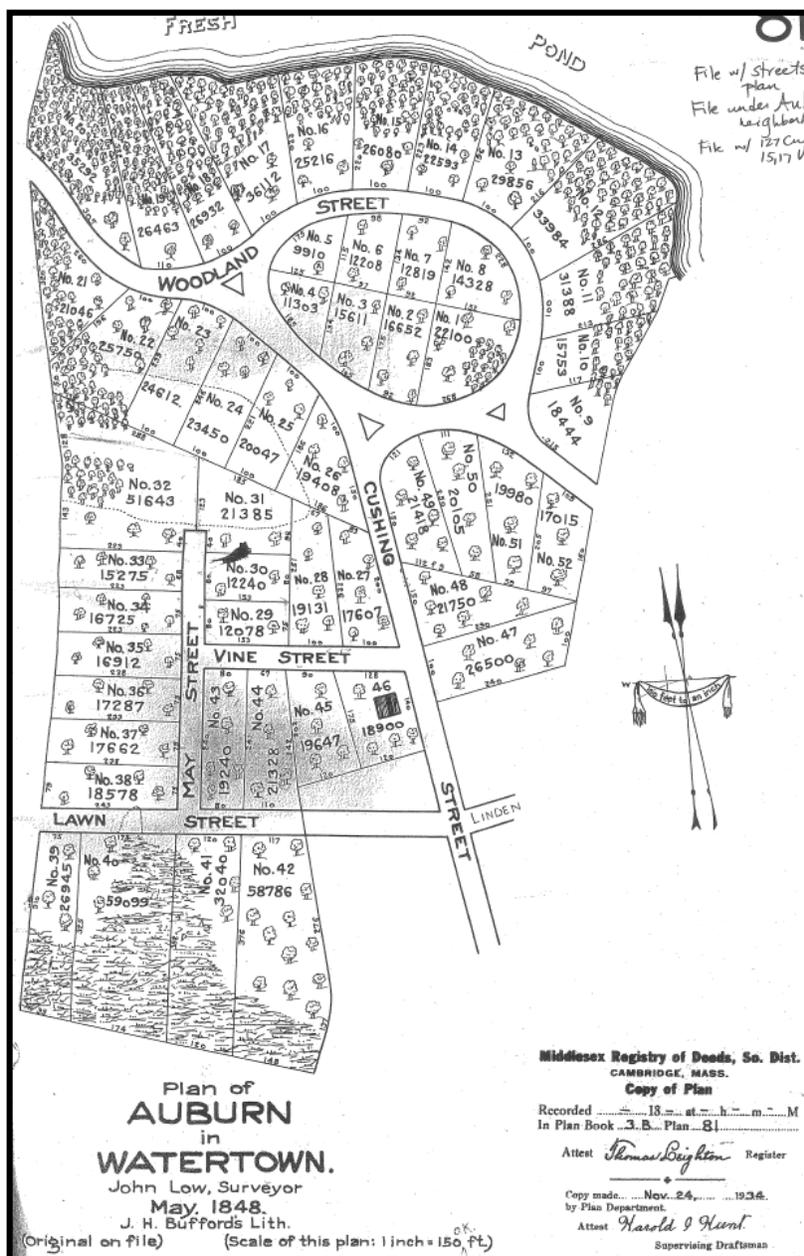
The Strawberry Hill neighborhood lies between Huron Avenue and Belmont Street on the boundary of Belmont. Originally part of Watertown, the area was opened to development by the opening of Mount Auburn Station on the Watertown Branch of the Fitchburg Railroad in 1846. In 1859 this part of Watertown was set off to the new town of Belmont. In 1880 the neighborhood was annexed to Cambridge to protect the surroundings of Fresh Pond.

Initially the neighborhood was envisioned as a suburban retreat for commuting Bostonians; "Strawberry Hill" was the name of a subdivision platted by Alexander Wadsworth, designer of Mount Auburn Cemetery, in 1847. Vineyard and upper Cushing Street were part of an adjoining subdivision, "Auburn," which was also laid out in 1847 by Boston surveyor John Low. The area was too remote to lure middle class commuters, and it wasn't until after 1860 when deed restrictions were relaxed that the lots became attractive. The area then began to be settled by Irish laborers. The Town of Belmont erected a schoolhouse on Cushing Street in 1872. Further growth was halted by the Panic of 1873, but the pattern of modest single and double houses was continued when building resumed in the mid-1880s.

Harvard College acquired the land in this area in the will of John Hayward in 1672. The college sold the Hayward Pasture to Nathaniel J. Wyeth (1802-1865) in 1829. Nathaniel was the son of Jacob Wyeth (1764-1857), builder of the Fresh Pond Hotel on the northern bank of the pond in the 1790s. Nathaniel was an enterprising young man in his twenties when he was hired by "Ice King" Frederic Tudor (1783-1864) to manage the ice business at Fresh Pond. Nathaniel invented important tools of the trade such as a two-horse saw that greatly improved the business. (R. Gilman, *CHS Proceedings*, v. 28, p. 30). Though the ice trade was growing quickly, Wyeth indulged his adventurous side and led three expeditions to the Oregon Territory beginning in 1832, hoping to make inroads into the fur trade. He returned to Cambridge in 1836 and continued to do business here in the ice and brick industries and in real estate. He helped finance the railroad extension to the pond for the ice business and greatly increased the brickmaking operations in West Cambridge. He was a very important figure to the economic development of West Cambridge and an influential figure in Cambridge society.

Wyeth contracted with tenant farmer David Haynes in 1837 to, within five years, construct a house on the Hayward Pasture. The fulfillment of this agreement was recorded in 1843. The Wyeth Tenant House was the first home constructed in the neighborhood, and it appears on the subdivision Plan of Auburn by John Low. It is the oldest home on its original site in Strawberry Hill, though some older structures were relocated in the 1890s to lots in the neighborhood when the land surrounding Fresh Pond was cleared for the protection of the water supply and creation of Kingsley Park.

The Hayward Pasture property and Wyeth Tenant House property were purchased by a group of Boston investors and the Auburn subdivision plan recorded in 1848. The house lot was designated as lot 46 of the Auburn Plan, and was purchased in 1849 by William Hilliard, a Boston lawyer. It was successively owned by Richard Hastings, housewright (1850), Daniel Leahy, laborer (1874), and Henry Hale, surveyor (1888). Residents prior to the purchase of the property by the Saint Lucy's Mutual Benefit Society included James Smith, a Boston salesman, and Patrick J. Monahan, gardener.



The Auburn plan subdivided a pasture owned by Nathaniel Wyeth, whose tenant farmer occupied the house at the corner of Cushing and Vine (now Vineyard) streets.

The property was until earlier this month owned by the Saint Lucy's Mutual Benefit Society and operated as the Santa Lucia Society, an Italian-American religious and social club. Architect Rosario Bianco designed the chapel and other renovations made to the building in 1933. The ceiling on the southern half of the building was vaulted for the chapel, a new entry door introduced facing Cushing Street, and the windows changed to stained glass on the south wall. The northern half of the building remained in residential use and was, presumably, rented out over the years by the club. The neighborhood attracted Italian families, many of whom were employed by local industries such as the Hood Rubber Co. in Watertown. The Santa Lucia Festival has been important community event over Labor Day weekend for many years.

The City Council passed an order on September 21, 2015 to honor the club, which is dissolving this year,

Sept 21, 2015

MAYOR MAHER

WHEREAS: It has come to the attention of the City Council that Cambridge's own Santa Lucia Society, which has been a fixture in the Mount Auburn neighborhood for over 75 years, will officially be dissolving at the end of the summer; and

WHEREAS: The Society has been a social gathering spot for countless Italian Americans who have carried on the tradition of honoring Saint Lucy, the Patron Saint of the Poor and Eyes, and has hosted its annual Labor Day Weekend Festival along Cushing Street for many decades; and

WHEREAS: This Labor Day will mark the official end of the Society; now therefore be it

ORDERED: That the Executive Assistant to the City Council be and hereby is requested to determine a suitable location in the vicinity of Cushing and Vineyard Streets to honor the Santa Lucia Society and that this request be and hereby is forwarded to the Dedication Committee with the request that the Committee hold a special meeting to approve this sign request.

Recommendations

The Wyeth Tenant House is the oldest house on its original lot in Strawberry Hill and is significant for its important associations with Nathaniel J. Wyeth a prominent leader in the development of West Cambridge and Fresh Pond industry and development. It retains its original residential character on the Vineyard Street side. The building was modified significantly in the twentieth century for use by the Santa Lucia Society and is also significant to the neighborhood for its associations with this charitable organization and represents the twentieth-century social history of Italian-American population of Cambridge.

I suggest that the Commission review the plans of the developer and take testimony from the neighbors before making a further determination.