



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: June 30, 2016

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Susan E. Maycock, Survey Director and Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: Case D-1402: James Dalton House, 146-148 Pearl St. (1855)

An application to demolish the James Dalton House at 146-148 Pearl Street was received on June 15, 2016. The owner, Campbell Ellsworth of the 146-148 Pearl Street LLC, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for July 7, 2016.

Current Conditions

The Dalton house occupies a 4,151 square-foot lot (94/182) on the east side of Pearl Street, midway between Decatur and Valentine streets. This lot measures only 45' wide at the front and 37' wide at the back of the lot, which is 100' deep. The house is a 1 ½-story frame building with a side facing gable roof. The zoning is Residence C, a multi-family housing district that requires 1,800 square feet per dwelling unit. The FAR and height limits in this district are 0.60 and 35 feet. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors database, is \$693,100 - \$135,200 for the house, and \$557,900 for the land. The property sold in April 2015 for \$641,500.



146-148 Pearl St., 2016

CHC Staff photo

The front of the house is set back from the sidewalk by 8'. The side setbacks range from 5' on the left (north) side to 9.5' on the right (south) side.

The house is in fair condition. The roof and walls appear sound, but a former hoarding situation required considerable remediation on the interior of the house after the former occupants moved out. Aluminum gutters are present on the front of the building but is damaged at the northeast corner at the intersection of the main block and the ell. The typical settling and framing issues of an older home are also present here.



Rear of 146-148 Pearl St., 2016

CHC Staff photo

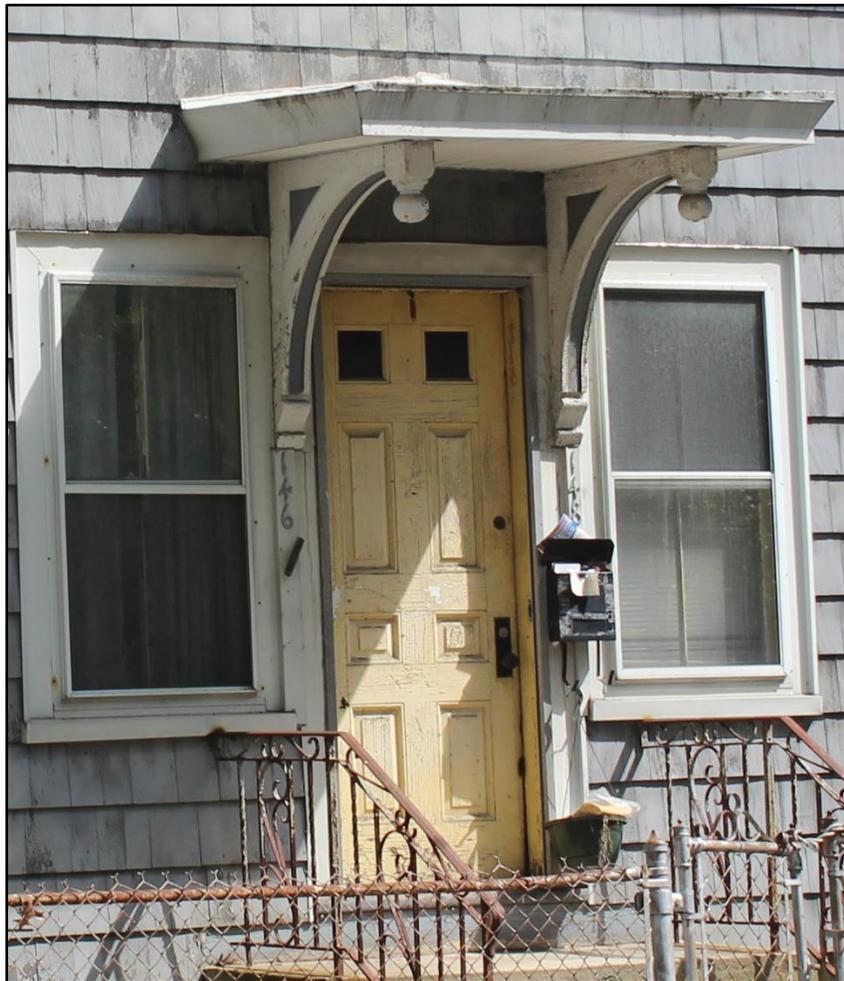
The house is situated between two three-story buildings at 140-144 Pearl Street (1904) and 152 Pearl Street. An adjacent house (150) of the same size and vintage was pushed back from the street in 1874 for the construction of the new building at 152. Across the street are a double house at 151-153 Pearl Street and row houses at 3-7 Lawrence Street, built in the late 1860s.

The applicant proposes to demolish the existing house and construct a two-family home and office in a modern style. Though the original proposal was for preservation of the front house and construction of a new free standing house in the rear, the applicant would like to develop this property for his own family and maximize the backyard space by building a single structure at the front of the lot. The plan and elevation drawings for the proposed project are on file.

Description

The James Dalton house at 146-148 Pearl Street is a one and a half story wood frame workers' cottage built in 1855 on a two foot high brick foundation that was subsequently covered with cement. Facing Pearl, about 8 feet back from the street, the cottage has a low gable roof that runs parallel to the street and a center entrance flanked by two 2-over-2 windows on each side of the door. Although this is a double house, it has a single entrance door; two windows directly abut the door forming a center composition with a simple bracketed hood that provides the only exterior ornamentation on this otherwise plain façade. The main block of the cottage is only one room deep but a kitchen ell with very broad gable roof perpendicular to the front gable extends the house 14 foot to the rear, a typical configuration for double center entrance workers' cottages with a side by side plan.

The house is currently covered in wood shingles but would originally have been clad in clapboards, as were the other double workers' cottages constructed nearby at 132 Pearl Street (aka 31 Decatur) 138 Pearl (aka 32 Decatur), 140-144 and 150-154 Pearl Street--all built in 1855. This is the only one of the group that retains its historic form; the others have been substantially enlarged and altered, obscuring their original center entrance plan.



146-148 Pearl Street, Bracketed entry hood detail. CHC Staff photo.

History

The lot now occupied by 146-148 Pearl Street was part of a 6 acre parcel between Pearl and Brookline streets south of present Decatur Street. This formed the southern edge of the large tract of land in Cambridgeport that belonged to William Watson (ca. 1755-1811) who was said to have received it as compensation for maintaining an aged former slave that had belonged to his grandfather, Samuel Whittimore. The settlement of this part of Cambridgeport was stimulated by the construction of the West Boston Bridge in 1793. Prior to the bridge opening, the area south of present Massachusetts Avenue was completely unpopulated. Francis Dana owned most of this area but William Watson, a glazier who lived near Harvard Square, owned about 26 acres that ran between Pearl and Brookline streets from Massachusetts Avenue to Valentine Street and along William and Cottage streets to Pleasant Street. In 1800 and 1801 Dana and Watson laid out Franklin Street and Pearl and Brookline streets to about half their present length and began to sell lots.

Watson's land between Brookline and Pearl streets was somewhat removed from the original settlement of Cambridgeport that was focused near the intersection of Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue, and sales south of the avenue were slow. After Watson's death in 1811, most of his land was sold in 1816 to raise money for his heirs. At that time John Wheeler and Lusher Gay, purchased the 6 acre parcel south of present Decatur Street that included the future site of James Dalton's house. Gay was a Cambridge merchant who became colonel of the Cambridge regiment in 1822 but removed to Troy NY in 1829; nothing is known of John Wheeler.



Development of this area was associated with soap manufacturing that was established on an industrial scale in Cambridgeport in the early 19th century. The first soap factory began in 1804 as a profitable way of disposing of tallow, a byproduct of the slaughterhouses that had been established in Cambridgeport after the opening of the West Boston Bridge. One of the largest soap factories was owned by Charles Valentine, a very wealthy Cantabrigian who lived in a magnificent house on Prospect Street (now the site of

Whole Foods) and who was also engaged in the wholesale provision and beef packing businesses. In 1828 he established a soap and candle manufactory that covered most of the block between Pearl and Brookline on the south side of Valentine Street, which was then a fairly isolated area of Cambridgeport. Between 1835 and 1841, Valentine built at least three double workers' cottages as housing for his employees, at 5-7 Cottage Street and 95-97 and 101 Pearl Street, convenient to the factory but several blocks north of its noxious fumes. The provision of factory housing was unusual in Cambridgeport, but the double workers' cottage form of Valentine's houses became quite common in the area in the first two thirds of the 19th century. Charles Valentine died suddenly in 1850 at the age of 52, and Charles L. Jones, who had been in charge of the soap department since 1845, took over the factory.

Image above: Example of a Valentine's double workers' cottage at 95-97 Pearl Street, demolished in 1972.



Walling Map of Cambridge, 1854

By 1850 Brookline and Pearl streets had been extended almost to the river although not all the cross streets were in place and there had still been very little residential construction. In 1855 James Dalton, a soapmaker, purchased two lots from Valentine's estate and was taxed for two new houses at 140-144 and 146-148 Pearl Street, both one and a half story double workers' cottages similar to those built by Valentine. Another Irish soapmaker Michael Moran built a similar double workers' cottage for himself next door at 150-154 Pearl Street; this was moved to the rear of that lot in 1874 when a new house was built facing Pearl Street. Dalton's house at 140-144 Pearl was demolished in 1904 and replaced by a three-decker, leaving 146-148 Pearl as the last of five 1855 workers' cottages on this stretch of Pearl Street that retains its original form.

According to census records, James Dalton was born in Ireland in 1814 and came to this country as a young man. In 1846 he bought an 1830's house at 5 Laurel Street near Pleasant (demolished in 1934) and is listed in the Cambridge directories from 1848-1854 as a laborer living there. By 1856 he is listed as a soapmaker living in one of his houses on Pearl Street. He continued living there and working as a soapmaker, presumably in the soap factory just south of his house, until his death in 1885, leaving his wife, Bridget, who continued to live there and on nearby Decatur Street for another 10 years. The house passed from James Dalton's estate through several owners in the 20th century but remains in substantially original condition.



Pearl at Decatur, 1932. Engineering Dept. Collection, CHC
Two double workers' cottages at 132 and 138 Pearl Street are visible at the right in this photo.

Significance and Recommendation

The Dalton House is an intact example of the double workers' cottage house type significant for its architectural form and associations with the broad architectural, social and economic history of Cambridgeport, and especially for its associations with soapmaker James Dalton and the soap industry started in Cambridgeport by Charles Valentine. One of five such buildings constructed on the east side of Pearl Street in 1855, this is the only one of the group that retains its historic form; the other extant examples (132, 138 and 150-154 Pearl Street) have been substantially enlarged and altered, obscuring their original center entrance plan. The Dalton House still retains its characteristic architectural features including its center entrance, bracketed entrance hood, paneled door, and two-over-two double hung sash windows.

I recommend that the Commission review the proposed plans for new construction and hear public testimony from the neighbors before making a further determination.

cc: Campbell Ellsworth, owner & architect
Ranjit Singanayagam, ISD