



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Fl., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Telephone: 617 349 4683 Fax: 617 349 3116 TTY: 617 349 6112

E-mail: histcomm@cambridgema.gov URL: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic>

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Date: June 29, 2017

To: Cambridge Historical Commission

From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: D-1457: 29 Bellis Circle, Sargent-O'Connell House (1856)

An application was received on June 14, 2017 to demolish the house at 29 Bellis Circle. The applicants, Nicole Barna & Dudley Wyman, were notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for July 6, 2017.

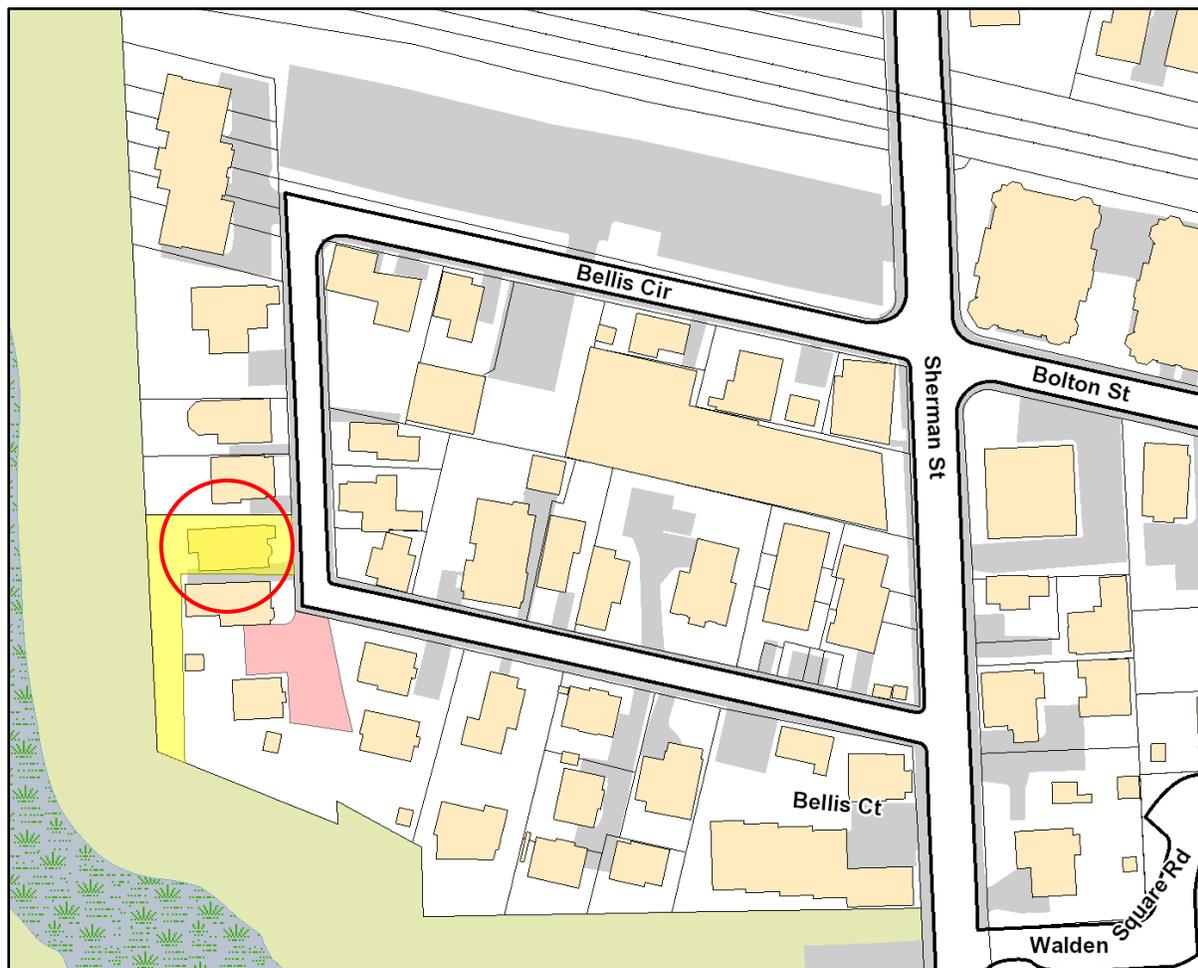
Site Condition and Context

The structure, a 2½-story home with a gable roof and brick foundation, is located at the southwest corner of Bellis Circle. The irregular L-shaped lot abuts Danehy Park on the west and 31 and 27 Bellis Circle on the north and south. The lot measures approximately 5,360 square feet (Map 271/Parcel 15), but the narrow strip at the back of 25 and 27 Bellis Circle is only 20' wide. The Res-B zoning district allows one and two family houses and townhomes with an FAR maximum of .50 and a minimum of 2,500 square feet per dwelling unit. The height limit in this zone is 35 feet.

This neighborhood is quiet enclave situated between the busy Sherman Street to the east, the commuter rail line to the north, and Danehy Park on the west and south. It has seen a number of its smaller workers cottages demolished or extensively remodeled in the last twenty years with a resulting eclectic mix of new and old homes on the street. Neighboring residential properties include other 2½-story single and two-family homes as well as the small workers cottages that once predominated on Bellis Circle and some larger townhomes that were built in the 1980s.

A very large silver maple at the northwest corner of the house is indicated on the site plan and the proponents intend to try to preserve this tree with a cantilevered construction method at this corner of the proposed new house.

The overall condition of the house has been rated by the Assessing Department as excellent. The property's most recent assessed value was \$1,175,200 and the property sold in May 2014 for \$1,300,000. The current owners wish to build a new Net Zero high performance home of similar scale and footprint to the existing. The Board of Zoning Appeal heard the case in March 2017 and granted the required variance and special permit for the proposed replacement building. The sequence of the BZA and CHC hearings has been reversed, despite our normal communications to the BZA and the applicants that a CHC hearing would be required for demolition of the existing house.



Architectural Description

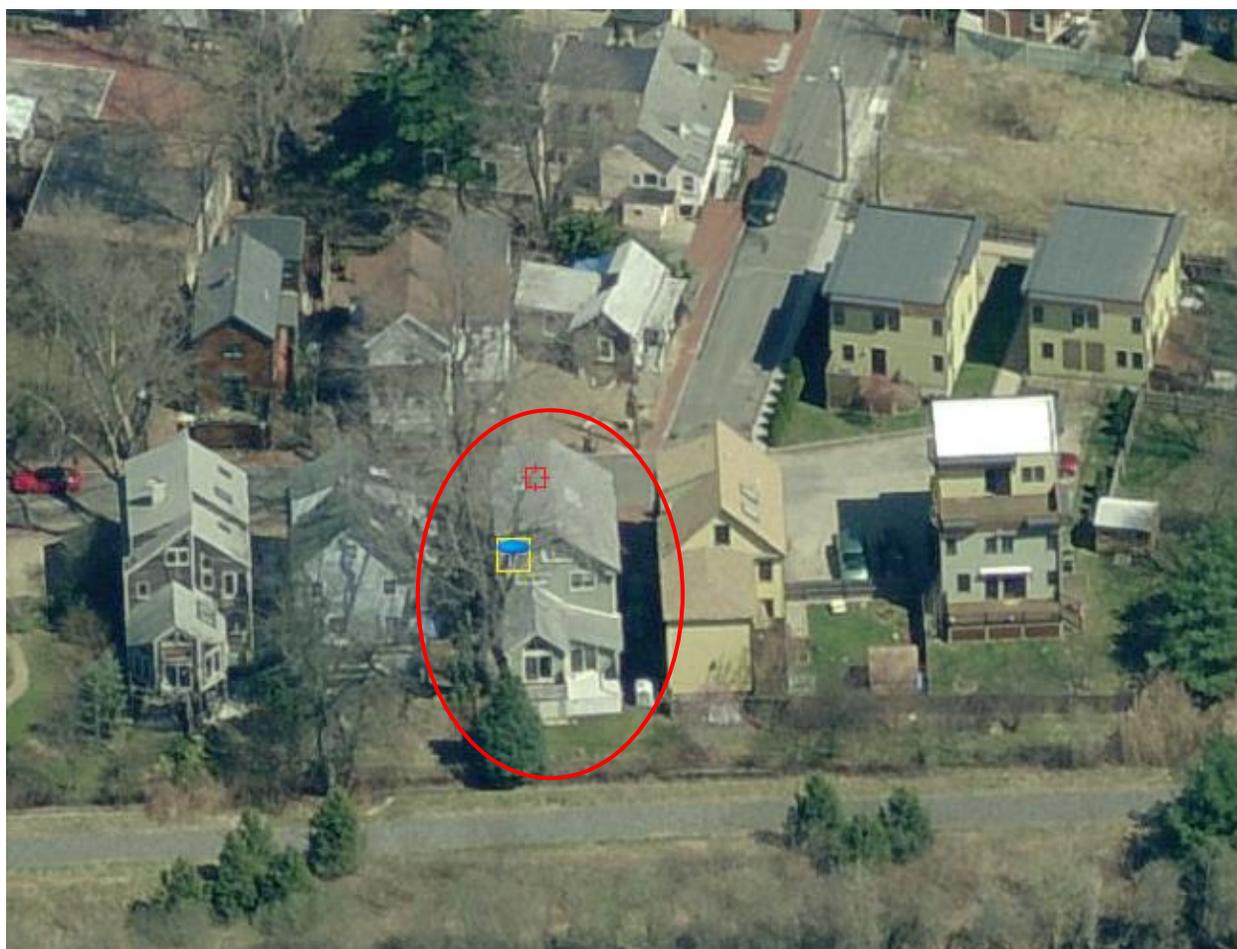
The two-bay Bracketed-Italianate side hall house was built in 1856. The 2½-story house sits on a brick foundation with a front-facing gable roof. The gable features wide overhanging eaves and corner returns but no brackets. A single story three-sided bay with a hipped roof and decorative modillions is the primary ornamental feature of the façade. The front entry likely was originally topped by a bracketed hood. The front porch landing with its austere shed roof was added prior to the 1972 survey of the property. The existing double hung windows are later replacements in a 6-over-1 pattern.

The house has been remodeled several times over the years, but the changes have not changed its essential form. A shed dormer was added on the north side before 1972. An entry porch was added in 1924, then later remodeled. Subsequent layers of siding were added and later removed. Clapboards were restored to the building's exterior in 2005. The original ell was on the south side and the larger addition at the rear was built in 1971.



29 Bellis Circle, south and east elevations

CHC staff photo, June 2017



Aerial view of Bellis Cir.; west (rear) elevation of #29 circled. CONNECTExplorer image, downloaded June 2017

History

The 1842 extension of the Charlestown Branch Railroad from Miller's River to Fresh and Spy Ponds opened up North Cambridge for the brick industry and for residential development. In the early 1840s, Irish immigrants who were too poor to settle in more developed areas formed a shanty town in the marshy clay lands near the Fitchburg Railroad crossing. The availability of cheap labor hastened the development of the brick industry, and between 1844 and 1850, several brick yards began operating nearby. In 1847, the clay deposits in the area that is now Danehy Park began to be mined for the manufacture of bricks and other clay goods. The New England Brick Company operated on the site until 1952.

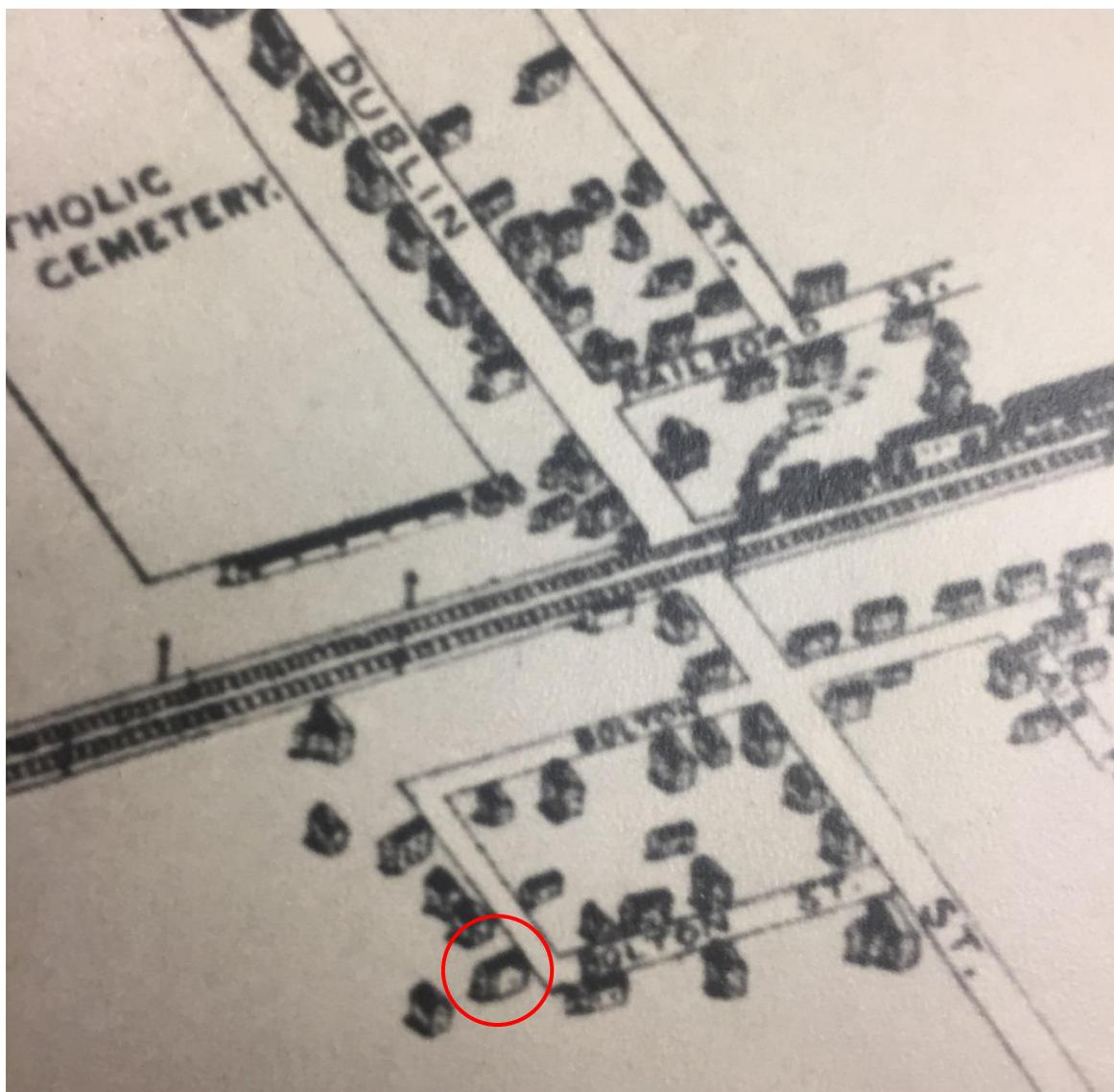
Entrepreneurs began to see the potential in developing small farms and available land for housing the growing working class population. Brickyard owners operated boarding houses and platted several subdivisions for the mostly-Irish worker population. The first large-scale subdivision of land near the clay pits was organized in 1846-47 by Soloman Sargent, a local farmer and entrepreneur. Sargent platted 49 lots into the area between the railroad tracks and Rindge Avenue, adjacent to the Catholic cemetery. This subdivision came to be called "Dublin" after one of the two major streets to be laid out there, Dublin Street (now Sherman Street) and Sargent Street.

Sargent's second subdivision was platted in 1851 on the south side of the railroad on either side of Dublin Street. Sargent named this new 45-lot development "New Ireland." Bolton Street crossed Dublin Street and made a loop. Blair Place was also laid out as part of this subdivision. Sargent worked with a local carpenter, Erastus Hutchinson, to build houses on eight of the lots, but sold the other lots without improvements.

Sargent sold this house on lot #15 of his New Ireland subdivision to Daniel O'Connell, a Cambridge laborer, in 1856. O'Donnell sold the house in 1864 to Timothy McCarthy. The property was purchased William J. Bellis, a brick mason, in 1869. The Bellis family resided there from 1869 until approximately 1907. They built a second house behind #29 in 1874 and the larger Queen Anne house at #27 in 1895. The Bellis family retained ownership of #27 well into the 20th century. The looped portion of Bolton Street west of Sherman Street was renamed in 1946 in honor of John F. Bellis, an army technician who was killed in action during the Normandy invasion.

By 1910, 29 Bellis Circle was occupied by two families. A. J. Boudreau, a clerk, and F. L. Campbell, a watchman, were listed at that address in 1910. Antonio and Josephine Messore purchased the property in 1928. Antonio was a laborer and rented the other unit to Peter and Emilia Nazzaro. It appears the house went back into single family use about 1940. Antonio and Josephine continued to reside there through the 1960s.

The city began to use the vast clay pit to the south and west of Bellis Circle as a garbage dump even before the New England Brick Company vacated the property in 1952. The dump was closed in the mid 1970s, when the city contracted with the MBTA to deposit the clay and rock that was being excavated from the Alewife T Station site on top of the trash deposits in the dump. Up to 40 feet of clean fill capped the 50-acre landfill site. Danehy Park was completed in 1992, increasing the city's open space by 20 percent. A wetland marsh area was even recreated on the northeast side of the park closest to Bellis Circle, to maintain a natural environment for plants and animals and for flood control purposes.



1877 Bird's Eye View of Cambridge by the Franklin View Company

Significance and Recommendation

The Sargent-O'Connell house at 29 Bellis Circle is significant for its associations with the broad social and economic history of North Cambridge, specifically for its associations with the New Ireland residential subdivision, the Irish immigrant working class, and the brick industry that developed around the clay pits and railroads. The Dublin and New Ireland neighborhoods are concentrations of the earliest form of permanent housing stock for Irish immigrants that exists in the Boston area. The area is significant to the city's and the region's vernacular architectural history.

Public testimony and the presentation by the applicants should be considered before making a further recommendation.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services Department
 Nicole Barna & Dudley Wyman
 Tagore Hernandez, Group Design Build Inc.