



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: October 31, 2017

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles M. Sullivan, Executive Director
Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: D-1471: 140-142 Prospect Street, Richardson-Houghton House (1842-44)

An application to demolish the double house at 140-142 Prospect Street was received on October 13, 2017. The applicant, the Islamic Society of Boston, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a hearing scheduled for November 2.



CHC photo, Nov. 2017.



140-142 Prospect St. (highlighted in yellow).

Cambridge GIS, Oct. 2017

Site

The structure is located on the east side of Prospect Street just north of Harvard Street. The 2½-story frame house sits on a brick and field stone foundation. The 2017 assessed value for the land and building is \$740,800. There is no curb cut on Prospect Street, but automotive access to the lot is provided from Scouting Way, the rear boundary of the lot. The structure is sited on a 6,114 square-foot lot in an Office-1 zoning district. The zoning allows offices and multi-family residential construction with an FAR of 0.75 and a height limit of 35 feet. A minimum of 1200 square feet of lot area is required per dwelling unit. The property is located within the Prospect Street Overlay District (Cambridge Zoning Code, Art. 20.200) where dimensional, use, and design regulations specified for this area apply.

The owner, Islamic Society of Boston, purchased the building in 1994 and has occupied it as a study center. The proposal is to demolish the existing double house and construct a new 4½-story building containing one 1-bedroom and nine 2-bedroom units and ten below grade parking spaces accessed from Scouting Way.

The immediate neighborhood consists of small early 19th century houses except for the former St. Mary's Hall next door, which is now an office building. Prospect Street, once a residential avenue, is now a major traffic artery and commercial uses are prevalent.

(The description and history that follow have been excerpted from the staff memo of July 2, 1992 and updated as necessary).

Architectural Description

The Richardson-Houghton House is a Greek Revival style double house built between 1842 and 1844. It is a 2½ story, gable roof structure with the flank of the roof facing Prospect Street. It is divided vertically, each half being entered through an offset entrance in the gable end; in plan, it comprises two mirror-image, three bay sidehall plan cottages joined together. The Greek Revival portico with its Ionic columns formerly extended across the full front of the house but was removed sometime after 1992. A Colonial Revival porch was added at the entrance to #140 on the south side.



CHC survey photo, 1969, with front portico and Ionic columns (removed after 1992).



2017 view from northeast, looking toward Prospect Street from rear of adjacent property.

The house's original clapboards are covered by layers of artificial siding including asphalt (1945) and aluminum (1968). The Greek Revival style is still expressed in the overall massing, closed pediment at the gable ends, balanced fenestration, and the entablature and pilasters surrounding the north entrance. The original rake moulding remains. The windows are mostly replacement units; one exception is the original 6-over-6 wood sash window over the porch on the south side. The building's interior has been largely stripped of original finishes.



North entrance (#142) with original surround



South Entrance (#142) with later porch addition

The roof is sound and the structure does not appear to have major water penetration issues, though the gutters need to be cleaned out. The aesthetics of the house are diminished by the unfinished concrete block facing the street where the portico was removed, missing shutters and stained aluminum siding.

History

The neighborhood in which the Richardson-Houghton House is located began to grow in the second stage of Cambridgeport's development, and by the 1840s became one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in the new section of the city. Prospect Street was laid out by Middlesex County in 1804 to provide a route from Charlestown to the Western Avenue and River Street bridges. The earliest houses on the street were very scattered, and development seemed to have begun in the late 1830s; the first house in the vicinity, 147R Prospect (1837, extant) and began a colony that included 145 (1841, extant), 149 (1842, extant), 146 (c. 1843, demolished 1972), 150-152 (1843, extant), and 140-142 Prospect (1842-44).

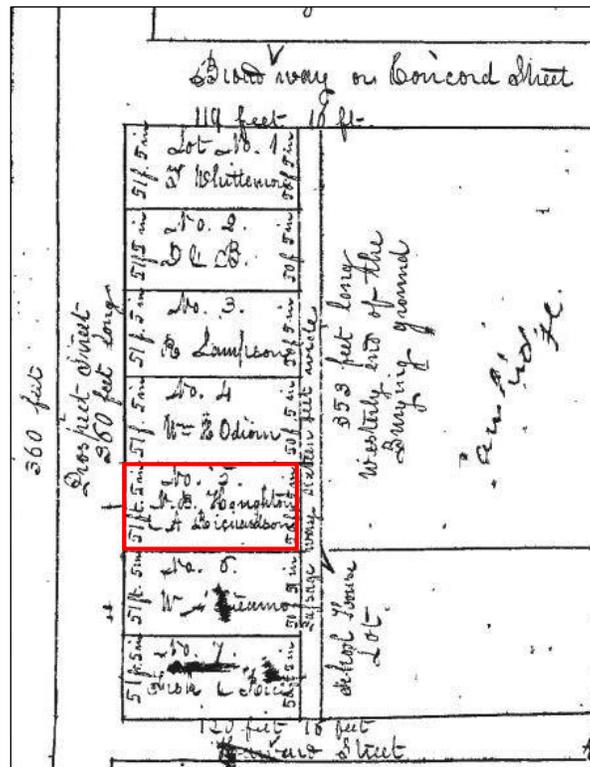
Broadway in the vicinity of Broadway Common was a prestigious street, but was outdone by the neighborhood around the Valentine-Fuller House at 125 Prospect

Street (1848, demolished 1937) and the monumental brick Prospect Congregational Church (1851, extant). This section was the most prestigious and elegant in Cambridgeport from the late 1840s to the 1880s. In the late 1890s, however, Prospect Street was widened to accommodate electric street cars; most of the trees were cut down at that time. The Valentine house was replaced by a First National Store in 1937, leading the way for expanded commercial uses in the 1940s and 50s.



Prospect Street Congregational Church, 99 Prospect St. (left) and Valentine-Fuller House, 125 Prospect St. (right)

In the typical pattern for early 19th century development, the entire frontage between Harvard Street and Broadway was purchased by Charles Davenport and Albert Bridges in June 1842. The partners immediately had the lot surveyed, and on July 29 sold seven lots to as many different individuals.

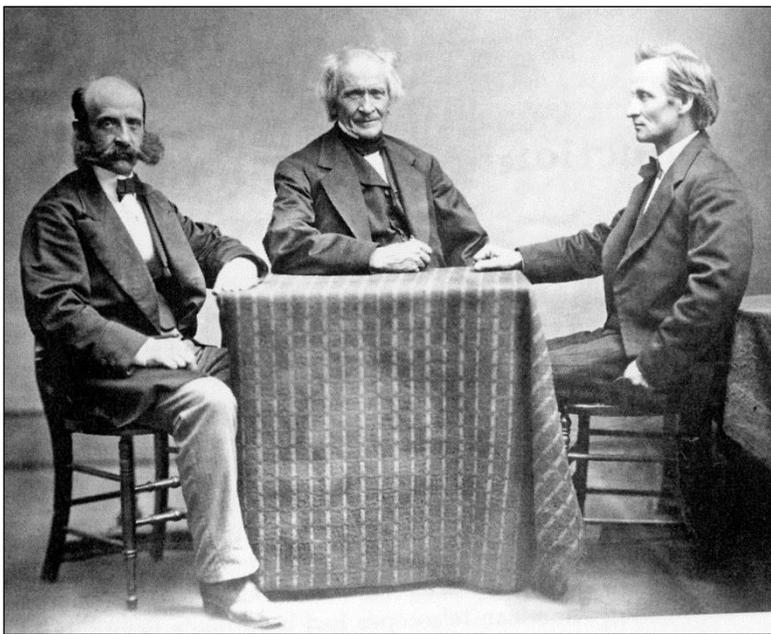
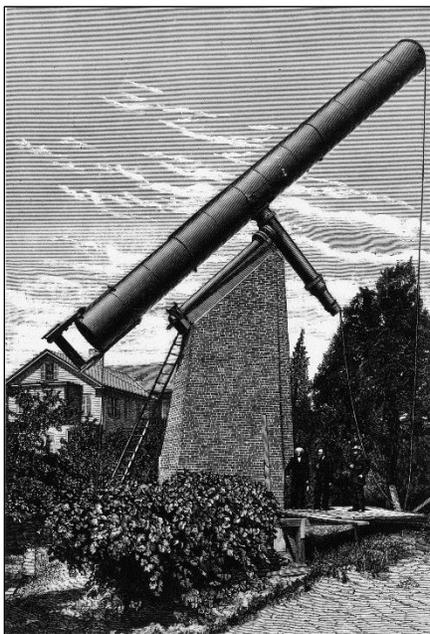


Charles Davenport's 1842 Subdivision Plan of lots on the east side of Prospect Street between Harvard and Broadway. Lot #5 is outlined in red.

Richardson and his partner, Moses Houghton, also a housewright, bought lot #5 and built a double house there. The southern half of the lot (#140 Prospect) was sold to James M. Cutter, a merchant, and the northern half (#142) was sold to Alvan Clark, an engraver and portrait painter who resided at 88 Prospect Street and had a studio in Boston. Clark would shortly thereafter start a telescope manufactory with his two sons, Alvan Graham and George Bassett. Not unusual for the period, the properties were sold with deed restrictions preventing the practice of noxious trades, including those of blacksmith, starch-maker, butcher, tinman, sheet iron worker, ink maker, practical chemist, tallow chandler, or soap boiler, or any other “nauseous or offensive trade whatever.”

Clark purchased 142 Prospect Street from builders Richardson and Houghton in 1844 and rented out the home. Among his tenants were George B. Hunting, a driver and the proprietor of an omnibus company. Hunting was described in the newspaper as a great favorite of the ladies because he was a skillful driver and fine looking. (*Cambridge Chronicle*, “Rapid Transit Sixty-five Years Ago,” May 6, 1911.) Clark sold the property in 1868 to John Towne a Boston businessman.

Clark and his family resided from 1836 until 1860 in another Greek Revival house at 88 Prospect Street. He began the production of reflecting telescopes in the mid-1840s following a school project by George Bassett Clark (Phillips Academy class of 1846) who melted down a broken bell, and with his father’s help, shaped a 5-inch parabolic reflector. Alvan was still making a living as a painter but became more and more interested in astronomy and began to study the science. The first telescope they sold was to the Putnam Free School in Newburyport in 1848. The Clarks built a workshop behind their house at 88 Prospect Street and soon began work making glass lenses for refracting telescopes. They formed the business of Alvan Clark & Sons in 1850. Their skill and reputation increased and by 1860 they needed a larger workshop to make an 18.5 inch diameter telescope for the University of Mississippi. Clark purchased nearly two acres at Brookline and Henry streets in the southern part of Cambridgeport known as Pine Grove where he built a double house, workshop, and observatory. The Clarks made the lenses for the largest refracting telescopes in the world and their 40-inch lens made in 1897 for the Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin remains the largest working refractor in the world.



Alvan Clark & Sons' property, Brookline St.; Alvan Clark (center) and sons Alvan G. (left) and George B. (right).

The first owner of 140 Prospect Street, James M. Cutter, was a stationer in business in Boston. The property was later home to Moses A. Howe, the pastor at the Second Methodist Episcopal Society on Harvard Street and Levi Jennings, a shoe dealer in Boston.

Significance and Recommendation

The significance of the Richardson-Houghton House lies in its architecture as one of an important group of Greek Revival houses remaining in this section of Prospect Street and for its associations with the early history of Cambridgeport. Though altered and exhibiting the wear of deferred maintenance, it still manages to contribute to the historic character of the street. The association with Alvan Clark and his sons is interesting but limited, since the family did not reside in the house but kept it as an investment property.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services Commissioner
Yousef Abouallaban, Islamic Society of Boston
David Choi, architect