

**Albert B. Wolfe Collection
1958-1998**

**Donated to
The Cambridge Historical Commission
by
Albert B. Wolfe
and his daughter
Diana Wolfe Larkin**

3.6 linear feet

**Prepared by
H. Alice Dodds
April – October, 2006**

**Cambridge Historical Commission
City of Cambridge
831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139**

Description

The Albert B. Wolfe Collection was donated to the Cambridge Historical Commission in part by Mr. Wolfe himself and in part by his daughter, Diana Wolfe Larkin. Mr. Wolfe collected these papers during his tenures as Chairman of the Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee (1961-1962) and as Chairman of the Cambridge Historical Commission (1962-1973). Also included are a few personal papers from 1963 until the time of his death in 1998. During the entire period of his service to the City of Cambridge, Mr. Wolfe maintained his legal practice and worked out of the offices of his law firm, Rackemann, Sawyer & Brewster, at 28 State Street in Boston.

Historic preservation undertakings, such as noted above, were enabled and empowered throughout the country by federal, state and local legislation passed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Mr. Wolfe was a pioneer in promoting these efforts. The Cambridge City Council moved quickly to implement these laws. In 1961 it adopted a resolution creating the Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee; a group charged with proposing a plan for an historical preservation program for the city.

The papers of the Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee are of interest for their description of the pioneer work done to identify the preservation needs of Cambridge and to propose specific steps to meet these needs. A major debate over the advantages of "historic sites" vs. "historic districts," to define the historic units to be worked with, was resolved in favor of "historic districts." Within a year, the Study Committee completed its mission by proposing the establishment of a permanent city agency, the Cambridge Historical Commission, to oversee and administer the city's historic preservation program. Ordinance No. 727, passed by the City Council in 1962, established this Commission, and defined its membership and responsibilities.

The records kept by Mr. Wolfe on the work of the Cambridge Historical Commission are the primary focus of this collection. They also are a reflection of Mr. Wolfe's personal involvement in the work of the Commission; as chairman, as administrator, as attorney, and as a leading figure in the preservationist field.

Mr. Wolfe's role as chairman placed him at a structural apex, which gives an overall view of every aspect of the work of the Commission. His role as an administrator records organizational structures, committee and Commission memberships and meetings, and budgetary and staff concerns. As an influential leader in the field, Mr. Wolfe maintained far flung contacts with many diverse individuals and institutions.

But Mr. Wolfe may have made one of his greatest contributions as an attorney, and in so doing have responded to one of the most important responsibilities assigned by the City to the Commission: the adjudication of cases regarding work on historic buildings. Mr. Wolfe presided over nearly forty such largely precedent setting cases. The records he maintained are in depth and meticulous, and reflect an important contribution to the preservation of the integrity of the community's historical environment.

However, in the most significant area of the Commission's work, The Survey of Architectural History, there is a paucity of materials available in the Wolfe Collection. This Survey produced a definitive, scholarly report on five Cambridge districts. Mr. Wolfe appointed a highly qualified Advisory Committee for each survey and selected a working staff of trained architects and historians. He also drew up a statement of purpose to guide the work. Then as an administrator, perhaps he stepped aside and delegated to experts. His records do not reflect his day-to-day, personal involvement in this significant effort. The bulk of these materials must be found elsewhere.

An exception to Mr. Wolfe's apparent disengagement from the Commission's historical endeavors can be found in the full records he maintained on historic sites. These background materials on over thirty locations, buildings and monuments were assembled in connection with the Commission's program on Markers, Trails and Brochures. Two publications were produced using these materials, and they were also an integral part of the Commission's collaborative effort with the National Park Service on The Historic American Buildings Survey undertaken in 1963, 1964, and with the Eastern Massachusetts Regional Planning Project in 1967.

In his role as leader and facilitator, Mr. Wolfe may be acknowledged for the superb results achieved by the Commission in its major undertaking: the historical surveys of Cambridge. On publication of the fifth and final survey report in 1977, Mr. Wolfe was able to write to Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission as follows: "With the completion of Report V: Northwest Cambridge. . . completing the Survey of Architectural History, Cambridge now has what is probably the most thorough, complete and professional history and analysis of its current built environment of any city as large in the world."

The few personal papers contained here concern primarily Mr. Wolfe's presentations, particularly his speech to the American Bar Association in 1963, as well as correspondence, biographical materials, honors bestowed on him, and obituaries.

Scope and Content

Series I – Historic Preservation Legislation

Mr. Wolfe played a significant role in the passage of legislation directed toward historic preservation goals; particularly the enactment of the Massachusetts State Legislature's Chapter 40C, which empowered cities and towns to establish historical commissions. Nothing of this role is evident in this collection. Furthermore, most of the legislative materials contained here, both Federal and State, are fragmentary and in process. Two exceptions are the Massachusetts State Chapter 359 (1971) amending 40C, and Chapter 517 (1971); both in full and final texts. The materials available on the City of Cambridge's preservation legislation do give some insight into Mr. Wolfe's contribution; both to the City Council Resolution of 1961 establishing the Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee and to its Ordinance 727 (1962) creating the Cambridge Historical Commission. Full texts of both measures are included.

Series II – Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee

The records of the Cambridge Historic Districts Study Committee give a sketchy picture, through correspondence, of the group's operations and results. Two major issues are covered: the debate between the establishment of "historic sites" vs. "historic districts," and the reach of the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan District Commission vs. the Cambridge Historical Commission. The outcome of the first is clearly stated: "historic districts." The latter must be assumed to have been resolved, since the Cambridge City Council was able to adopt Ordinance 727. A copy of the Committee's report, at an unspecified stage of its preparation, is available, but the final report, that was published and widely distributed, is not. An independent report by Rosamund Coolidge Howe (1962, 1964), a member of the Committee, provides a useful overview of the Committee's work and a summary of its principal recommendations. The many letters received in response to the wide distribution of both the preliminary report (1962) and the final report (1962) are also available and of interest. A large number of clippings provide a welcome fleshing out of the Committee's work.

Series III – Cambridge Historical Commission – Members, Advisory Committees, Minutes

The membership materials provide a running account of the changing members of the Commission itself (1963-1973), and also list the members of the Advisory Committees, which eventually numbered seven. Also included here is a statement of the Committees' guiding purposes. The minutes, fully covering the 1963-1972 period, are an especially rich source of information on the day-to-day workings of the Commission, and the questions and issues it confronted. The Commission's meetings also served as public hearing on requests for Certificates of Appropriateness; the approval needed to allow work to be done on historic buildings and locations.

Series IV – Cambridge Historical Commission – Budget and Staff

The budget materials provide information on the financial support of the Historical Commission by the City of Cambridge from 1964-1974. Of special interest are the occasional annual reports on the work of the Commission. These reports are folded in with the budget report of the past year and the budget request for the coming year; making it desirable to check several years to obtain the full picture. The staff records indicate the importance attached to a clear-cut contractual relationship with each employee; as a folder on the development of such a contract and the presence of a contract(s) in the file of each of the twenty-nine staff members confirms. Most of the staff members were temporary, part time, and seasonal, with little material on file. Others, such as Bainbridge Bunting, Arthur Krim, Robert Nylander, and Robert Rettig, were the professional, if intermittent, backbone of the Commission and accumulated substantial records over a period of years. There is also a folder on applicants who were not employed.

Series V – Cambridge Historical Commission -- Correspondence

Mr. Wolfe's correspondence represents a substantial segment of his collection for two reasons: first, as a prominent figure in the historical preservation field, Mr. Wolfe was in touch with numerous, far flung communicants, and; second, working from his law office in Boston, he often engaged in written communication with the Commission staff located in Cambridge. The letters exchanged with individuals outside the Commission usually do not exceed brief exchanges, cover an infinite variety of subjects, and represent prominent leaders as well as private individuals. Mr. Wolfe's correspondence with the Commission's staff is found throughout this collection under almost every subject heading. The letters included in this series are either of a general nature or cover a number of different subjects, no one of which predominates.

Series VI – Cambridge Historical Commission – Architectural History Surveys of Cambridge

The materials in this collection on the Commission's signature undertaking, the five historical surveys of Cambridge, are primarily restricted to Ms. Wolfe's limited involvement in this effort. Included are copies of his contributions to these reports, consisting of two forewords and two conclusions (East Cambridge, and Cambridgeport, and Old Cambridge). The texts of two reports (East Cambridge and Cambridgeport), whether in process or in final form is uncertain, are also available. Some correspondence on day-to-day matters can be found. Otherwise, however, these records are sparse. Printing and distribution arrangements with the MIT Press, are also recorded here.

Series VII – Cambridge Historical Commission – Markers, Trails, Brochures

This series covers modest ground but is well documented. A general folder on "markers" describes a number of sites, including the Kosciuszko plaque, locations of interest in and around the Cambridge Common and other points of interest. These materials were of assistance in the preparation by Commission staff of two popular walking tour guides: "The Heritage Trail" and "A Guide to Cambridge Architecture: Ten Walking Tours."

Series VIII -- Cambridge Historical Commission -- National and Regional Historical Surveys

These files record the cooperative arrangements made by the Cambridge Historical Commission with federal and state agencies to conduct surveys of historic Cambridge buildings and sites. Included here is correspondence with the National Park Service regarding the Commission's cooperative efforts with the Park Service's Historic American Buildings Survey. A folder of Park Service literature fully describes this project. The Eastern Massachusetts Regional Planning Project is outlined in some detail by Mr. Wolfe in a letter of February 15, 1967 to President Pusey of Harvard University and President Johnson of MIT. A folder containing a number of lists of historic buildings and sites, one dated as far back as 1940, offers comparative data of interest. This series leads into Series IX, which describes many of these historic locations in some detail. .

Series IX -- Cambridge Historical Commission -- Commission's Inventory of Historic Cambridge Buildings and Sites

The records in this series touch on over 30 Cambridge buildings and sites. Many are described in historical and architectural detail. Some, such as the Jared Sparks House, the Ross House, and the Sargent House, were studied as part of the National Park Service's Historical American Buildings Surveys. (See Series VIII) The write-ups on buildings such as these by the Cambridge Historical Commission's professional staff provide a rich resource on Cambridge's historic infrastructure. In addition to the materials on buildings, this series covers significant sites such as the Cambridge Common, Brattle Street, and the Old Burying Ground.

Series X -- Cambridge Historical Commission -- Historic Buildings and Sites -- Cases

Collected in this series are the materials on thirty-eight cases presided over by Mr. Wolfe. These primarily concern alterations to historic building, though cases on infrastructure such as Longfellow Park and Harvard Yard, were also heard. By far the largest number of these buildings were located in the Longfellow Park/Brattle Street area, though Harvard University and Garden Street locations are also represented. Mr. Wolfe maintained these records meticulously. They are in date order, are carefully numbered in sequence of appearance, usually include a notice of a hearing, and in every instance have the statement of approval, known as "The Certificate of Appropriateness." The amount of activity generated by each case varied widely. The 3 Garden Street case in 1965 generated a single sheet of paper, the Certificate of Appropriateness, while three folders of materials were collected, covering the years 1969-1972, regarding the interrelated cases of 24 Craigie Street, 127 Brattle Street and 133 Brattle Street. A folder on Mr. Wolfe's carefully maintained running list of these cases, and another on the development of the Certificate of Appropriateness form, are also of interest. The folder on "Public Hearings" contains records dating only from 1963-1966, and should be supplemented by the "Minutes" folder in Series III.

Series XI – Cambridge Historical Commission -- Preservation Groups and Institutions

Indicative of Mr. Wolfe's wide influence in the historical preservation field are the materials gathered into this series on preservation groups and institutions. Nearly thirty such organizations were in correspondence with Mr. Wolfe from every corner of the United States and from abroad. Most of the exchanges were brief, with the exception of the city of Providence. Providence had been a leader in the field, and Mr. Wolfe's correspondence and direct personal contacts with Antoinette Downing, Chairman of the Providence Historic Districts Commission, are recorded here. There is also a folder on the preservation literature published by Providence.

Series XII – Wolfe, Albert B.

Most of the papers in this series were collected after Mr. Wolfe's retirement as Chairman of the Cambridge Historical Commission in 1973. These records include correspondence from the years 1973-1977 and 1995, biographical information, material regarding a gift for Mr. Wolfe at the time of his retirement, and obituaries. Earlier records, during his tenure as Chairman, relate to his talks and presentations to various groups. Of particular interest is Mr. Wolfe's speech, "Conservation of Historical Buildings and Areas, Legal Techniques," to the American Bar Association in 1963, and the warm letters of response it prompted. A transcript of an extensive interview with Mr. Wolfe is available, but difficult to follow.

Folder List

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