



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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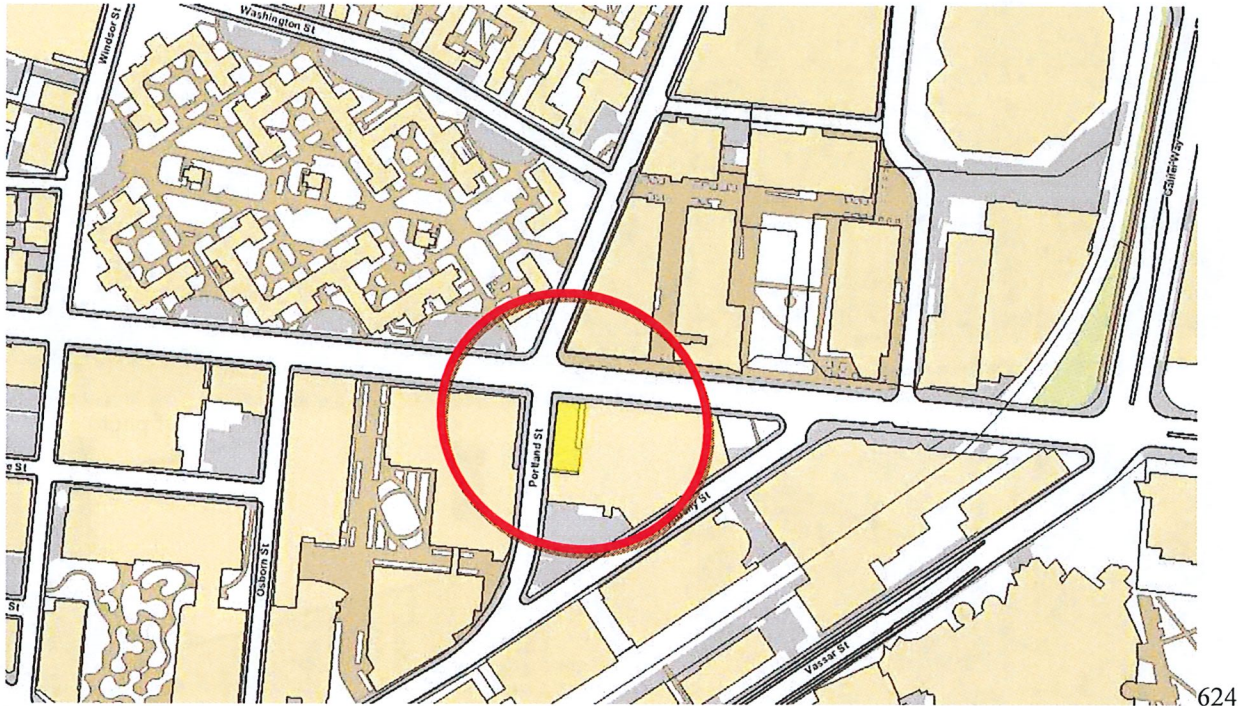
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September 25, 2020

To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Charles Sullivan
Re: Case D-1556: 624 Main Street

An application to demolish the former Olmsted-Flint building at 604 Main Street was received on September 3, 2020. The applicant, MIT 600 Main Street Fee Owner LLC on behalf of the Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT and Harvard, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for October 3.



Main Street

Cambridge Assessors

Status

The former Olmsted-Flint building at 624 Main Street is located near Kendall Square on a triangular block bounded by Albany and Portland streets. The building almost completely occupies a 5,999 square foot lot (Map/Lot 71-20) and is joined on two sides by a former auto dealership and garage occupying a 69,035 square foot lot (71/40). The Olmsted-Flint building is assessed for \$8,500, and the lot is assessed for \$ 2,168,300. The adjoining property is assessed for \$ 12,995,700. Both properties are owned by MIT 600 Main Street Fee Owner LLC and have

been leased to The Ragon Institute for 99 years. The other building on the lot is not considered significant for the purposes of the demolition delay ordinance.

The zoning for both lots is Industry B (IB), in which all uses except housing are allowed. The height limit is 120 feet and the FAR in 4.0.

The proponent intends to demolish the existing structures and develop the entire block as a headquarters and laboratory for the Ragon Institute. The new five-story, 235,000 sq. ft. structure would be roughly triangular in plan with landscaped setbacks along Main Street, reaching the full permitted height at the corner of Main and Albany and falling to 90' at the corner of Main and Portland.

The Ragon Institute is a department of the Massachusetts General Hospital that is operated in conjunction with MIT and Harvard University to conduct research on the human immune system.

Description



624 Main Street, 1969

CHC staff photo



624 Main Street with scrim, 2020

CHC staff photo

The Olmsted-Flint building is a two-story brick structure built in 1882 that originally measured 39' in width along Main Street and 77' along Portland Street; with an addition in 1905 it now extends for 130' along Portland and almost completely fills its lot. The structure consists of brick bearing-walls with relatively light wood posts and floor framing, a type that was once categorized by the Cambridge assessors as "semi-mill construction." The exterior brick is laid in a running bond, with projecting segmental arches over the windows and doors and a corbelled cornice. The windows have 6+6 double-hung sash and granite sills. All these details are now obscured by a plastic scrim installed by the owner in the mid-1990s.

An interior inspection of the building revealed that the foundation consists of granite and ledge-stone blocks at varying depths below grade. The below-grade brick walls of the cellar feature several relieving arches, which may have bridged old tidal stream beds or soft spots in the marsh soil. The position of the windowsills indicates that the street grade was at some point raised as much as 24"; this may have occurred during the construction of the subway in 1909-1912.



West foundation, showing brick relieving arch filled with concrete, July 16, 2020.

CHC staff photo

The building was used for various purposes during its working life, including production of canned soups and roasted nuts and as a warehouse and workshop for a power transmission supplier. None of these activities seems to have resulted in any fundamental alterations to the basic structure.



The first and second floor ceilings support many line shafts used to power equipment throughout the building. This type of power transmission was common in factories of the period and could have been used by any of the occupants in various ways. While the prime movers (electric motors) have been removed, the belt-driven elevator hoist remains in place and was presumably operable until the building was vacated about 1990. The fact that the last owner, the Olmsted-Flint Corp., fabricated and sold this type of equipment meant that it was kept in use for far longer than elsewhere.

The condition of the building is poor. The foundation had visibly settled between visits two years apart, and the rear wall, which was damaged by fire at some point, has been braced and guyed to prevent collapse. MIT Real Estate, which acquired the building in 2000, wrapped the exterior in plastic to restrain failing masonry about 2005, and failed to maintain the roof. Active leaks were observed on both visits.

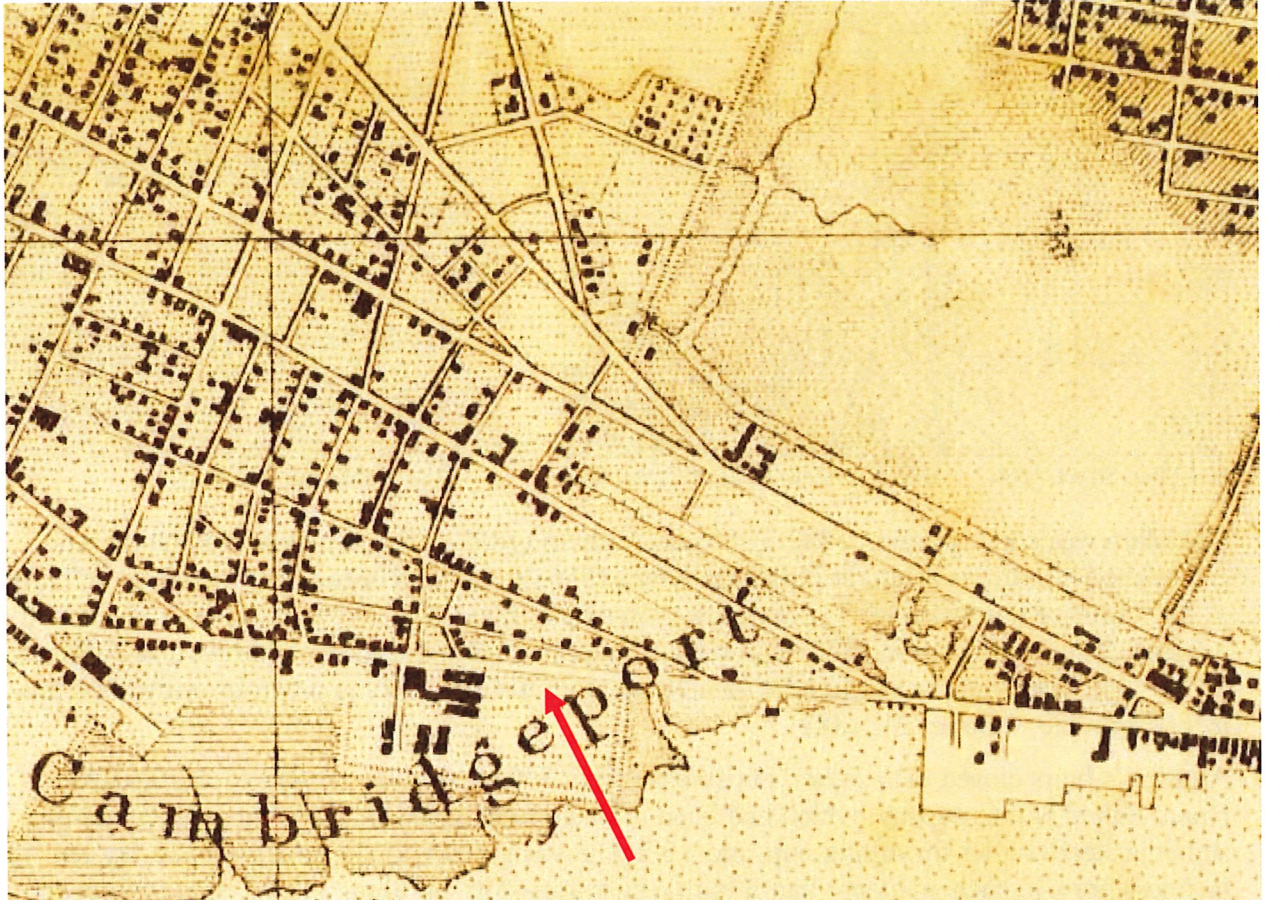


Line shaft, first floor (top); elevator mechanism, second floor.

CHC staff photos

History

The Olmsted-Flint building was built as a factory for the production of canned soups. In the early 20th century it became the first home of the Squirrel Nut Brand Company, and from 1915 until about 2000 it was a warehouse and workshop for the Olmsted-Flint Company, a supplier of power transmission equipment. The building was acquired by the Polaroid Corp in 1996 and sold to MIT Real Estate in 2000. It has been vacant since the mid-2000s.

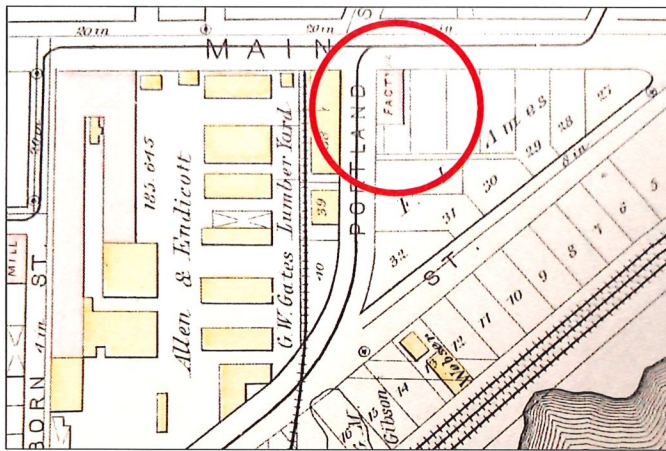


Cambridgeport in 1847, with the future site of 624 Main Street.

U.S. Coast Survey, 1857

The Olmsted-Flint building is located on Main Street about midway between Lafayette and Kendall squares. In the 18th century all of Cambridge east of Quincy Street was occupied by only four homesteads located well back from the wide belt of salt marshes and mudflats that formed the shore of the Charles River. In 1791-93 investors built the West Boston (now Longfellow) Bridge from the foot of Beacon Hill to the Cambridge shore at today's Kendall Square as well as a causeway to carry Main Street across the marshes to Lafayette Square. By the 1850s there was a small settlement at the bridgehead, while the Port neighborhood developed north of Main Street. South of Main, however, there was only the Davenport Car works in a diked-off area that ran from about Osborne Street to Ames Street. This former salt marsh was the future site of 624 Main Street.

Portland Street was extended from Hampshire Street to Main Street after the Grand Junction Railroad was built across the marshes in 1854, but the area south of Main remained undeveloped until after the Civil War. In 1875 real estate investors extended Portland Street and laid out lots along Albany Street, but the area was still subject to flooding and by 1886 only a few lots had been sold.



624 Main Street, 1886 G.W. Bromley, Atlas of Cambridge

ALGHIERI'S
BEST FAMILY SOUPS,

Awarded a Silver Medal by the
Mass. Charitable Mechanics
Association in 1881.

Green Turtle, Terrapin, Mock Turtle,
Julien, Ox Tail, Tomato, Clear Con-
sommé, Pea, Beef Tea, Mutton Broth,
and Italian Paste.

Made by SIMON ALGHIERI,
330 Main Street, Cambridgeport.
S. S. PIERCE & Co., Agents, BOSTON.

1884 Cambridge Directory

624 Main was constructed in 1882 by Simon Alghieri (1833-1899), a native of Palermo who established himself as a caterer in Boston about 1856. In 1870 he began offering home delivery of his “three celebrated soups” (*Cambridge Chronicle*, January 8, 1870). Alghieri’s business evidently prospered, and in 1882 he purchased a lot of land at the corner of Main and Portland Street “with a pile and stone foundation all ready to build” from some previous unfinished project (*Chronicle*, October 21, 1882).

Alghieri’s heirs closed their father’s business and in 1903 leased the factory to the Squirrel Brand Salted Nut Company, which had been founded in Roxbury in 1891. Squirrel Brand installed a steam boiler for drying nuts and a 3 h.p. gas engine to power its equipment, but its business grew to such an extent that it built a new four-story building on Boardman Street and moved there in 1914. The illustration below may reflect its earlier aspirations to expand the Main Street building.



624 Main Street, 1909

BERy collection, CHC



Squirrel Brand letterhead, 1909

CHC

The Olmsted-Flint Corporation succeeded Squirrel Brand at 624 Main Street in 1915. Founded as a manufacturer of leather belting in New York City in 1910, the company relocated to Cambridge to be closer to its predominantly New England clientele. Oak-tanned leather belts made from steer hides in lengths up to 300' long and a foot wide were preferred over other materials such as rubber or wire rope for transmitting power from a central source via line shafts and pulleys to machines throughout a multi-story factory. These were used in all types of industries, from large textile mills to small machine shops, and Olmsted-Flint became the predominant supplier in the area.



624 Main Street ca. 1935

Source unknown

Soon after arriving in Cambridge Olmsted-Flint also became a wholesaler of other power transmission products and advertised these in abundance. The company installed two large pulleys just below the cornice and used them to power twisted leather belts that carried advertising messages and seasonal greetings until MIT Real Estate, the building's owner after 2000, re-

quired that they be removed. Olmsted-Flint relocated to Woburn about 2005 and is still in business. These belts are fondly remembered and are still part of the company's logo.



624 Main Street, 1969

CHC staff photo



Olmsted-Flint Corp.

Facebook

Significance

The Olmsted-Flint building is significant for its associations with the industrial history of Cambridge and as an example of "semi-mill construction" industrial architecture.

Recommendation

The staff recommends Olmsted-Flint building be found significant but not preferably preserved due to extensive structural deterioration. The Commission should request that the owner document the structure according to the standards of the Historic American Buildings Survey and salvage the line shafting and machinery for display or donation to an industrial museum.

OLMSTED-FLINT CO.
Leather Belt Manufacturers
 HANGERS CAMBRIDGE, MASS. PULLEYS



Complete Mill Equipments
 PILLOW BLOCKS IMMEDIATE SHIPMENTS FROM STOCK STEEL



Millwrighting
 COUPLINGS Special Auto Delivery in Greater Boston WOOD


Greater Boston's Only Complete Transmission House

Boston Globe, May 4, 1919