

Sheila Cook Collection

**Donated to the
Cambridge Historical Commission
by Sheila Cook
2012**

1 cubic foot

Prepared by
Caitlin Birch
April 2012

Cambridge Historical Commission
831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Description

The Sheila Cook Collection was donated to the Cambridge Historical Commission by Ms. Cook in January 2012. The papers in the collection constitute Ms. Cook's initial donation, and the collection is expected to grow and evolve as additional materials are acquired. The papers within this primary acquisition represent several decades of activism and civic involvement in Cambridge, composed primarily of Ms. Cook's personal and organizational correspondence, as well as relevant newspaper clippings and government documents.

Ms. Cook was born in 1919, the second of five children, to Elisabeth Chafee Gamble and James Lawder Gamble, who was a doctor at Children's Hospital in Boston. Ms. Cook graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in 1942, where she studied social work. The years immediately following her graduation, during which the United States was heavily mired in World War II, were spent in Washington, D.C., where she worked for the Federal Housing Administration.

Ms. Gamble married Charles D. Cook on March 10, 1945, and the couple settled in Cambridge. It was at this time that Ms. Cook became active in Cambridge's city planning and zoning, studying in Harvard University's Department of Urban Planning and Design and involving herself in a number of city projects. She was appointed to a city committee to study the value of zoning in the 1950s, for instance, and helped to write the Cambridge zoning code in the 1960s.

The Cooks relocated to New Haven, Connecticut, where they lived for 11 years, and where Ms. Cook worked in the schools. In 1974, the couple separated, followed by a formal divorce on May 12, 1976. Ms. Cook returned to Cambridge, purchasing and moving into 34 Follen Street, the home she still occupies today.

After her return to Cambridge Ms. Cook split her time between social work, writing and community activism. While she founded and ran her own business — the Women's Job Counseling Center — and authored two books — *Dear Miss Hyde : The Friendship between Ellen Hyde, Principal of the First State Normal School in Framingham, Massachusetts and the Chafee, Sharpe, & Gamble Families, As Chronicled by Their Letters 1898-1926* and *The Great Swamp of Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge : an historic perspective of its development, 1630-2001* — the papers in the Sheila Cook Collection are largely concerned with her dedication to the Cambridge community.

Ms. Cook has been extremely active in zoning, historic preservation and civic causes in Cambridge. To give but one example, she was instrumental in the push to establish a Follen Street historic district, and when this failed in 1985, became part of the eventually successful alternative: the inclusion of Follen Street in the Old Cambridge Historic District. Her activism led to involvement in a number of community organizations, and these include (but are not limited to) Cambridge Neighborhood Nine Association, Neighbors of the Harvard Law School Lincoln's Inn Society, Friends of the Cambridge Public Library, Follen Street Longy Committee, Supporters of Arsenal Square, Alewife Neighbors Inc., Coalition for

Alewife, Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods, Friends of Alewife Reservation, Mystic River Watershed Association, Charles River Watershed Association, Friends of the Charles River White Geese, and the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club. In at least four of these — Cambridge Neighborhood Nine Association, Coalition for Alewife, Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods, and the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club — she has assumed leadership roles in an official capacity.

Issues and conflicts within the Follen Street community are central concerns of Ms. Cook's, and are evident in these papers. Her interests, however, extend to the greater Cambridge area; within this collection, a significant focus exists on planning and zoning in historic areas (Series II); preservation of waterways and nature reserves, specifically the Alewife Reservation (Series III); and the Cambridge gardening community (Series IV).

While materials in this collection span the years 1830-2012, the bulk of the Sheila Cook Collection focuses on the years 1990-2002. As the collection is expected to grow with the acquisition of more materials, these dates are reflective of the initial acquisition only, and can be expected to change. Despite the evolving nature of the acquisition, the Sheila Cook Collection as it stands now presents an important glimpse into the development and preservation of both the historic and ecological aspects of the greater Cambridge area. It is unique in its perspective — that of a citizen activist and longtime resident — and of lasting value to those who strive to understand Cambridge affairs in the years leading up to and following the turn of the century.

Scope and Content

Series I — Personal

The materials in this series provide autobiographical information on Ms. Cook, and include her brief representation of the history of Follen Street. Additionally, they provide a glimpse of some of Ms. Cook's interests unrepresented elsewhere in the collection. Chief among these is the United States political situation, past and present, as evidenced by newspaper clippings and materials from a course Ms. Cook took on John Adams.

Series II — Old Cambridge Historic District

Ms. Cook is deeply involved in zoning and historic preservation issues in Cambridge, and the materials in this series evidence that involvement. Areas of primary focus include the Cambridge Common, Follen Street and Arsenal Square. Materials related to the Common deal in large part with the 1997-1998 debate over bicyclists in the area and the proposed construction of a bike path through the Common. Follen Street issues represent the bulk of materials in this series, and cover a range of conflicts with neighboring institutions, including the Lincoln's Inn Society, Lesley University, the Cambridge Public Library, and the Longy School of Music. Finally, materials related to Arsenal Square in this series are primarily focused on the 1995-1997 debate over the proposed designation of 22, 24, and 26-28 Garden Street as part of the Old Cambridge Historic District, and the clash that ensued with Adams Realty Trust, owner of the properties.

Series III — Rivers and Wetlands

The fight to protect Alewife Reservation, a 120-acre urban wildland and wetland to the northwest of Cambridge, raged in full-force at the turn of the century. Ms. Cook acted as a passionate advocate for the preservation of the reserve, becoming heavily involved in the Coalition for Alewife and the petition by activist Ralph Yoder to rezone the Alewife area. These papers evidence that involvement, as well as a broader interest in the preservation of surrounding wetlands and waterways. Of particular emphasis within this broader interest is Ms. Cook's involvement in the white geese battle of 1998-2002, during which the Cambridge community was bitterly divided over the Metropolitan District Commission's effort to cull the white geese population along the Charles River. Additionally, this series also evidences Ms. Cook's involvement with the Mystic River Watershed Association and her dedication to continuing education in the area of wetland protection.

Series IV — Cambridge Gardens

Ms. Cook is an enthusiastic gardener, maintaining a personal garden at her home on Follen Street. This series provides a glimpse into the history and recent activities of the Cambridge Plant and Garden Club, one of the oldest garden clubs in the United States, as well as the Secret Gardens of Cambridge, an annual garden tour benefiting the Friends of the Cambridge Library.

Series V — Miscellaneous

This series includes editions of Belmont Citizens Forum, a newsletter for Belmont residents, spanning the years 2007-2011. Belmont, a neighbor of Cambridge, borders the Alewife

Reservation to the west. Newsletters within this series place a particular emphasis on issues of zoning and environmental concern.

Folder List

Series I — Personal

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| 1. Autobiographical Information, Drafts and Final | 2012 |
| 2. Miscellaneous Interests, Course Materials | undated, 2002 |

Series II — Old Cambridge Historic District

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| 3. Cambridge History | undated, 1989-2009 |
| 4. Cambridge Common | 1970-2009 |
| 5. Cambridge Common Bicyclists | undated, 1830-1999 |
| 6. Demographics and Transportation | 1990-2003 |
| 7. Zoning | undated, 1988-2004 |
| 8. Zoning, Sheila Cook Petition | undated, 1999-2000 |
| 9. Follen Street, Maps | 1977 |
| 10. Follen Street, Conflicts | undated, 1990-2009 |
| 11. Follen Street, Longy School of Music | undated, 1990-2004 |
| 12. Follen Street, Wire Burying | undated, 1994-1996 |
| 13. Arsenal Square | undated, 1982-1997 |
| 14. Brattle House | undated, 1988-2000 |
| 15. Cambridge, Miscellaneous | undated |

Series III — Rivers and Wetlands

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| 16. Alewife Reservation, Flooding | undated, 1984-2002 |
| 17. Alewife Reservation, Zoning | undated, 1987-2009 |
| 18. Fresh Pond | undated, 1991-2002 |
| 19. Mystic River Watershed | undated, 1994-2010 |
| 20. Charles River Esplanade, White Geese | undated, 1995-2002 |
| 21. Charles River Basin, Zoning and Health | undated, 1997-2010 |
| 22. Water and the Environment Course | undated, 1999-2002 |

Series IV — Cambridge Gardens

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| 23. Cambridge Plant and Garden Club | undated, 1976-2002 |
| 24. Secret Garden Tour | undated, 2001 |

Series V — Miscellaneous

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| 25. Belmont | 2007-2011 |
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