



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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

Telephone: 617 349 4683 TTY: 617 349 6112 Fax: 617-349-6165

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

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November 3, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director

Re: Cases D-1595 and L-141, Delaney House and Dentist Office, 2161 Massachusetts Avenue

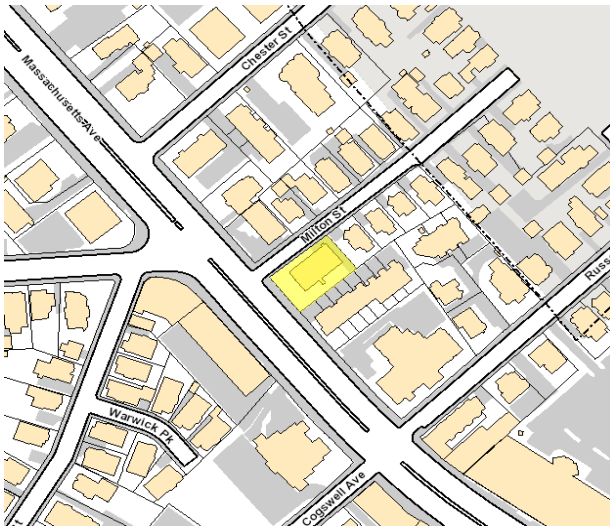
The future of the former Delaney House and Dental Office at 2161 Massachusetts Avenue, a significant example of the Moderne Style in Cambridge, has been the subject of discussions with prospective owners since the property was put on the market in about 2018. CHC staff has consistently advised that the building would be found significant for the purposes of the demolition delay ordinance and that it was a potential Cambridge landmark. On the basis of these discussions the current owner developed plans to preserve the building by relocating it on the site and constructing an addition. Relocating a building triggers a review under the demolition delay ordinance, leading to the hearing scheduled for November 10.

Meanwhile, a citizens' petition with 14 signatures was received on September 30, requesting that the Commission initiate a landmark designation study. The Election Commission verified ten signatures. The petitioners, the applicant, the American Friends Service Committee, and the owner, The Nelson Group, were notified and a public hearing was scheduled for November 10, 2021.



2161 Massachusetts Avenue, 1983

Chris Hail photo, CHC



2161 Massachusetts Avenue.



Cambridge Assessor's map and CHC photo

Description and History

The Delaney House and Dentist Office stands at 2161 Massachusetts Avenue at the southeast corner of Milton Street. It was built in 1939 to serve as a dwelling and professional office for Dr. R. Wilfred Delaney. Dr. Delaney was born on the Magdalen Islands, Quebec, and graduated from the University of Maryland Dental School in 1925. In 1927 Dr. Delaney opened an office in the Porter Square Theater Building at 2006 Massachusetts Avenue. A year later he married Georgianna Marie Page of Framingham and they moved in together at 4 Frances Place in North Cambridge.

By 1939, Dr. Delaney was able to construct a new home and dentist office on Massachusetts Avenue, which by that time had already shifted significantly from a residential street to a commercial corridor. Delaney hired well-known local architect William L. Galvin to furnish plans for a new building on the corner lot. The previous owners had repeatedly failed to obtain a zoning variance for a filling station and the 1854 house that had occupied the site was razed after a fire in 1932.

In February 1939 Dr. Delaney was granted a variance for a residence and professional office of brick veneer (instead of solid masonry as required by the zoning code then in effect). Dr. Delaney ran his practice out of the building and resided there until he moved to Belmont in the early 1960s. He passed away there in 1964. His practice at 2161 Massachusetts Avenue was acquired by Dr. George Roe, who resided in Melrose.

Dr. Roe sold the practice in 1971 to Dr. Daniel Herlihy Jr., a dentist who was born and raised in Cambridge. The office closed for good a couple of years later. In 1976, the building was purchased by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker-founded organization working for peace and social justice around the world. AFSC was founded in 1917 as an effort by American members of the Religious Society of Friends to assist civilian victims of World War I. The organization's role expanded to fight for improving racial relations, respond more forcefully to racial injustice, support women's issues, and fight for equal treatment for sexual minorities. The building was occupied by the AFSC until about 2018. The property was purchased in August 2021 by the Nelson Group, a Medford-based developer.



Dr. Delaney House and Office, 1939 rendering by architect

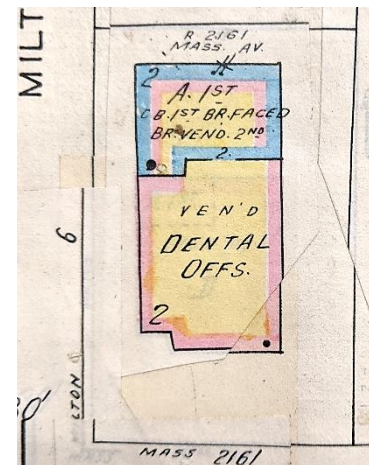
William L. Galvin, CHC Archives.

The Delaney building is an excellent example of the Art Moderne Style in Cambridge. This style was most prevalent from the 1930s-50s and is often grouped with the Art Deco style. Art Moderne and Art Deco overlapped in popularity and period of significance in American architecture, with Art Deco primarily used in public, commercial, and apartment buildings and Art Moderne for smaller-scale projects including homes and small retail buildings.

The Delaney House and Dentist Office is a wood-frame building with a brick veneer. The two-story building is a box in form topped by a shallow hip roof. The building features a prominent one-story, rounded entrance with a rippled motif of curved bricks defining the doorway. The building also features corner windows which wrap around the façade. The original metal casement windows have been replaced by white, double-hung windows in vinyl. At the Milton Street elevation, a more traditional entry with fluted pilasters and flared copper roof provides additional access to the building. A chimney extends up from the Milton Street wall plane between the corner bay windows and side entry. A postwar garage addition (now containing offices) on the rear extends the building with the same material and vocabulary.



2161 Massachusetts Avenue, Milton Street elevation.



1934 Sanborn Atlas, updated through 1959 showing garage addition



2161 Massachusetts Avenue, entry detail and original windows, 1970 (left) and 2021 (right).



Milton Street entry (left) and Milton Street addition detail.

Planning Issues

The Delaney building occupies a 7,520 square foot lot on the southeast corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Milton Street. The majority of lot is zoned Business A-2, which allows a height of 35' as of right and 60' under provisions of an overlay district, with a provision that any height above 35' be set back of a bulk control plane rising at an angle of 45° from the plane of the principal front wall. A total FAR of 1.75 is allowed. At 600 sf per dwelling unit, eleven units would be allowed. About 10' of the back of the lot is in a Residence B district.

Significance

The Delaney Dentist Residence and Office building at 2161 Massachusetts Avenue is significant as a rare example of an Art Moderne style office and residence and as a well-preserved design by Cambridge architect William L. Galvin.

A. Current Proposal to Relocate the Building

In recent years several potential developers have approached the staff about this building. All have been advised that CHC staff considers the building to be significant for the purposes of the demolition delay ordinance and a potential landmark. The current owner's proposal to relocate the structure on the site and remove certain portions to allow expansion into a nine-unit residential complex is the result of extended discussions with Commission staff.

The proposed project would remove about 8' from the north end of the building, accounting for 11% of the gross floor area, and relocate the remainder into the current front yard, reducing the Massachusetts Avenue setback from about 20' to the required minimum of 5'. A four-story addition on the east side would rise four stories to a height of 29'6", less than the 35' allowed in the A-2 district, and less than half of the 60' allowed in the Mass. Ave Overlay District. The exterior masonry would be restored, and the current replacement windows replaced by replicas of the originals.

B. Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible properties as:

any property within the city being or containing a place, structure, feature, or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures... (2.78.180.A)

Relationship to Criteria

The Delaney Dentist Residence and Office building meets criterion (1) for its associations with the architectural and economic history of Cambridge, and criterion (2) as "architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures."

Staff Recommendations

Landmark designation is both an honorific and a regulatory measure that requires considerable staff resources. While the Delaney Dentist Residence and Office building at 2161 Massachusetts Avenue clearly meets the criteria for landmark designation, CHC staff feels that the proposed development project, which includes moving the historic building forward on the lot and constructing an addition, would preserve the building in an architecturally-appropriate and economically viable manner. A finding that the Delaney building is significant but not preferably preserved in

the context of the current development proposal, with conditions requiring staff review and approval of construction materials and details, would protect the structure for the indefinite future and allow the Commission to decline the petition for landmark designation.

cc: Khalsa Design
ND Development, LLC
James Rafferty, attorney.