



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: May 28, 2021
To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner
Re: Petition for Neighborhood Conservation District Study of University Park and Bay State neighborhood

On May 4, 2021 CHC staff received a citizens' petition requesting the Commission to initiate the process of designating a residential area on either side of Concord Avenue between Walden Street and Bay State Road as a neighborhood conservation district (NCD) under Ch. 2.78, Article III of the City Code. On May 10, the Cambridge Election Commission verified that the petition contained ten or more names of registered voters, as required by the ordinance. CHC staff then advertised a public hearing for June 3 so the Commission could consider whether to accept the petition and initiate a study.

Background

The area petitioned for an NCD study consists of a part of West Cambridge bisected by Concord Avenue that was mined for clay, backfilled, and subdivided for residential development at the turn of the 20th century. Beginning about 1911 it was built up with large numbers of two-family houses, many of which were purchased by African Americans whose descendants populate the neighborhood today.



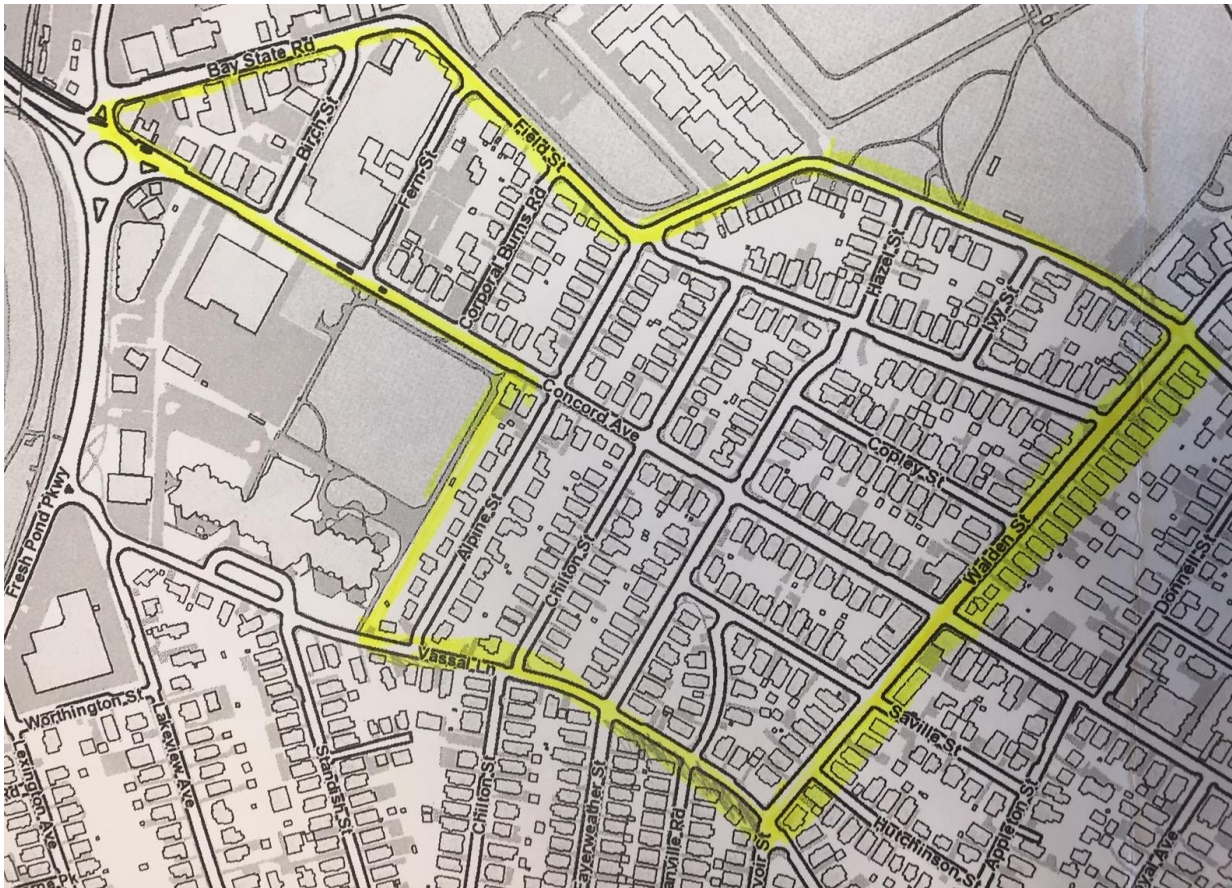
Proposed Study Area, 2021

Cambridge GIS

This area was almost entirely built out by 1930. Recent development trends have included some townhouse construction near the Fresh Pond rotary. Most construction in the neighborhood consists major renovation projects, but at least four demolition permit application requests have been made in the last dozen years including, most recently, 204-206 and 175 Fayerweather Street. Replacement buildings have been primarily single-family houses.

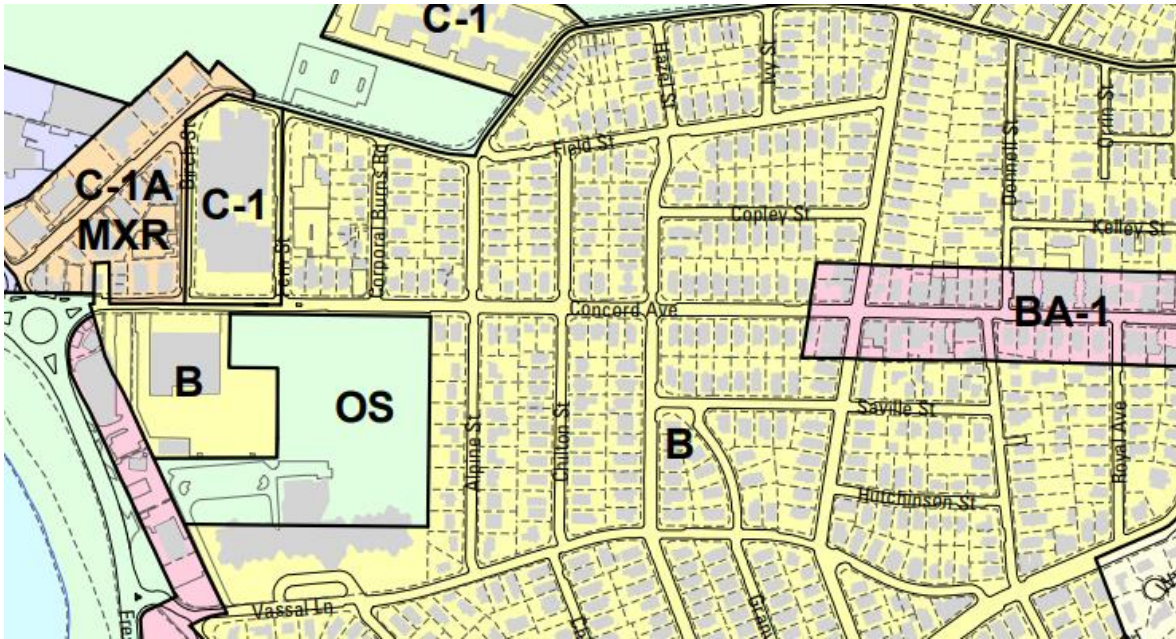
Boundaries

The petition describes the proposed study area as the “Northwest Cambridge residential subdivision originally know [sic] as University Park and Bay State, bordered by Vassal Lane, Walden St., Bay State Rd. Includes Concord Ave. to Bay State, Walden St. to Vassal to Garden St. Fayerweather from Walden to Field to Bay State.” A map was not provided with the petition, but based on the description, Commission staff notified approximately 435 property owners in the area indicated on the map on the following page. The area includes both sides of Walden Street between Vassal Lane and Garden Street but does not include non-residential properties west of Alpine Street such as Callanan Field, Tobin School, Cambridge Armory, and commercial properties on Fresh Pond Parkway. Notice was also provided through legal ad publication in the *Cambridge Chronicle* and online.



Boundaries of the proposed study area.

The parcels in the proposed study area are located primarily within the Residence B zoning district but also includes small areas in Residence C-1 (Between Birch and Fern streets) and C-1A Mixed Use Residential Overlay (between Birch Street and Bay State Road) and Business A-1 (Concord Avenue at Walden Street).



Cambridge Zoning map detail. Captured May 28, 2021.

Conservation District Criteria and Study Procedures

Conservation Districts are enacted by a simple majority of the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission.

The Historical Commission commences a conservation district designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of at least ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that are not timely or appropriate or do not meet the criteria for conservation district designation.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible neighborhoods as:

any area within the City containing places and structures which it determines are of importance to the architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City, and which considered together cause such area to constitute a distinctive neighborhood or to have a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of establishing Neighborhood Conservation Districts is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work.
(2.78.140)

Once the Commission accepts a petition or decides on its own to initiate a neighborhood conservation district study it immediately assumes jurisdiction over issuance of building permits in the proposed area for up to one year. The City Manager is requested to appoint a seven-person

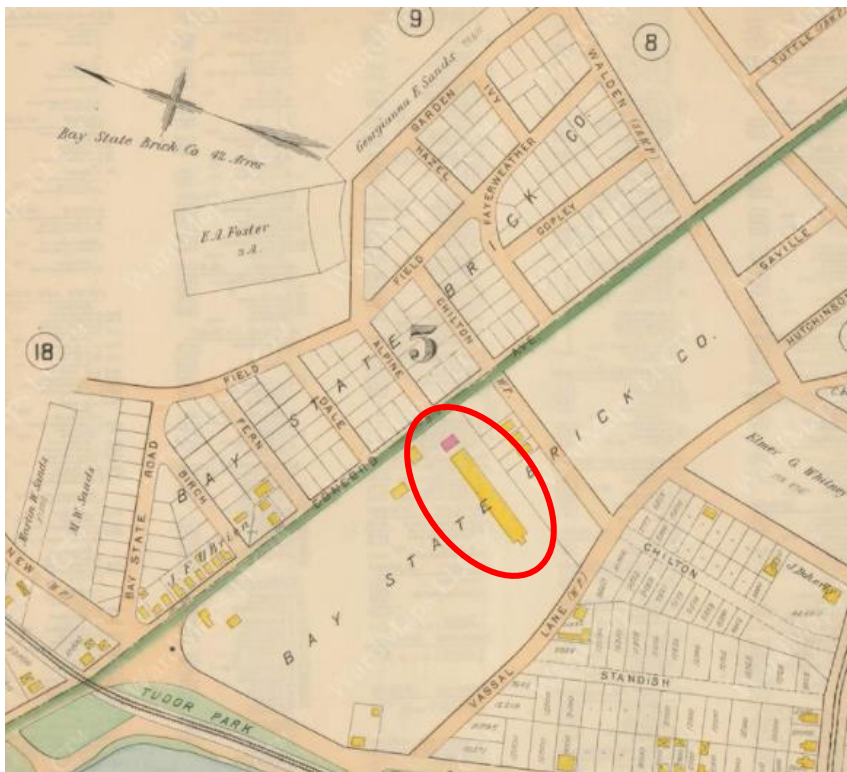
study committee consisting of at least one resident and one property owner within the district study area, one resident or owner from elsewhere in the City who has demonstrated knowledge and concern for conservation and enhancement of those exterior features of the City which are important to its distinctive character and three members or alternates of the Historical Commission. Study committee members are considered special municipal employees and all meetings of the committee are subject to the open meeting law.

The study committee, working with CHC staff assistance, assumes responsibility for refining the boundaries and developing the goals, guidelines, and jurisdiction of the proposed conservation district. The Historical Commission will hold a public hearing at the conclusion of the study process to consider the committee's recommendations and to formulate a recommendation to the City Council.

Relationship to Criteria

The proposed NCD study area consists of tracts on both sides of Concord Avenue from Walden Street to Fresh Pond Parkway that were developed in the early 20th century as a neighborhood of mostly two-family houses.

In Colonial times only two roads led west from the village at Harvard Square. Both Vassal Lane and Garden Street ended in the desolate marshes around Fresh Pond. The construction of Concord Avenue in 1807 opened the area to through traffic, but the area remained empty even after a community of Irish brickyard workers grew up around St. Peter's Church in the 1840s and '50s. Hundreds of acres west of Walden Street were strip-mined for clay that was fired into bricks or pottery. The depleted clay beds became mosquito breeding grounds, and the resulting malaria epidemics led the city to take action to see them filled and subdivided for development.



Bay State Brick Co. land along Concord Avenue as partially subdivided in 1896. The company's kiln and drying shed are circled.

1900 Stadley Atlas of Middlesex County

Vassal Lane long marked the boundary between the fields and farms north of Brattle Street and the large claypits and brickyards of North Cambridge. In the 1890s, the construction of Huron Avenue

and its streetcar line brought new development interest to that neighborhood, which was built up around the turn of the century with Queen Anne two-family houses and Colonial Revival triple-deckers. But the area along either side of Concord Avenue, between Vassal Lane on the south and Garden Street on the north, did not develop until after World War I.

In the late nineteenth century, the Bay State Brick Company purchased many smaller independent brickyards and consolidated their manufacturing operation in two plants, one off Rindge Avenue and one in this vicinity, between Walden Street and Fresh Pond Parkway. Unproductive clay pits, some of which had been in operation since the 1840s, were closed, filled, and sold for real estate development.

A low, wet pit between Concord Avenue and Garden Street was subdivided for residential development in 1896 in an effort encouraged by the Board of Health to control mosquitoes and reduce the spread of malaria. Though the Bay State Brick Co. subdivided the area in 1896, filling the pits and construction of streets and sewers required capital that was hard to come by after the Panic of 1893.

Joseph H. Allen and Otto M. Frank partnered to buy the Bay State land north of Concord Avenue and in 1911 hired W. A. Mason & Son to make a new survey of the subdivision. They embarked on a marketing plan for what they called University Park, emphasizing the convenience to Harvard University and the new Harvard Square subway station. Lot prices started at \$280. Allen and Frank advertised a very optimistic claim that residents could board the streetcar to Harvard Square and arrive at Park Street station via the subway within thirteen minutes. Despite their efforts, sales and house construction remained slow until after World War I.



1911 Subdivision plan of University Park, W. A. Mason Co., surveyor.

Good People of Cambridge, Wake Up!!!

and select your house lot at **UNIVERSITY PARK**, Cambridge, Mass., before they are all sold to the people of Boston and of other nearby cities, who realize the importance of the **HARVARD SQUARE SUBWAY**. We are offering "subway values" at "horse-car" prices.

Do you realize that the **SUBWAY** will enormously increase the values above Harvard Square?

Do you realize that it will bring **UNIVERSITY PARK** WITHIN 13 MINUTES of **PARK STREET**, Boston?

Do you realize that those who wait until the subway is in operation will have to pay the profits to those who buy now? Over 40 lots sold.

Title insured by Massachusetts Title Insurance Co.

Streets in and accepted. Sewers in and paid for. Proper restrictions. Prices \$280 upwards. Easy terms, if desired. Discount for cash. Building has started. Now is the time. **NOW! NOW! NOW!**

Office on ground open daily. Take Huron Avenue car and get off at corner of Huron and Concord Avenues.

UNIVERSITY PARK LAND COMPANY

JOSEPH H. ALLEN and OTTO M. FRANK, Trustees

Cor. Concord Ave. and Walden St., Cambridge, Mass.

Tel. Cambridge 2112-M

BOSTON OFFICE, 1053 OLD SOUTH BUILDING Tel. Main 6193

1911 advertisement for lots in the University Park subdivision. Cambridge Chronicle, May 6, 1911

The Bay State Brick Company also owned a 27-acre tract between Concord Avenue and Vassall Lane, bounded on the east by Walden Street and on the west by Fresh Pond Parkway. The company sold about ten acres to developer Eugene Gormley, who extended Chilton Street across the property in 1895-96. The three houses that were put up in 1897 were the first in the area, and for many years stood alone there. Gormley sold the remaining eight acres to an investment group for which Marion E. Pike was the owner of record. Pike's group laid out Saville, Granville, and Fayerweather streets across the tract about 1911 and subdivided it into 65 house lots averaging 5,000 square feet each. By 1916 there were 23 houses in the area, mostly along Concord Avenue, Walden Street, and Vassall Lane; the interior streets developed after World War I.

Construction in these new subdivisions boomed in the 1920s, when they became attractive to upwardly-mobile working and middle-class families from the more crowded neighborhoods in the eastern parts of Cambridge. Many of these families were African American, and this area of West Cambridge on both sides on Concord Avenue saw the emergence of a middle-class African American community that has persisted to this day.

The neighborhood is importantly associated with the broad social and economic history of the City, and in particular with upwardly mobile families in a neighborhood that represented the aspirations of African Americans in Cambridge in the early 20th century. The area is characterized by architecture in the Bungalow and Colonial Revival styles, many of which were executed as two-family houses that provided opportunities for rental income or multi-generational family living.

Staff Recommendations

The Commission should evaluate the petition for its appropriateness in terms of the significance of the proposed district, the urgency and relevance of the conditions the petitioners seek to address, the relevance of the proposed remedies, and the suitability of the proposed boundaries. The Commission

will hear testimony from the petitioners and other residents and property owners within the proposed study area before voting on initiation of a landmark designation study for the area.

Today a second petition was submitted and is signed by 113 individuals opposed to initiation of an NCD study. The signatures have not been sent to the Election Commission for verification of voter registration status, but it represents a large number of properties in the proposed study area. Further outreach by the original petitioners in favor of a study may be needed before the Commission can be satisfied that there is a good understanding of the goals and ramifications are of such a study. With the East Cambridge NCD study currently still underway, available time on the part of both staff and commissioners is scarce.

If the Commission does initiate a landmark designation study for the area, staff recommends that the goals and review criteria of the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District be adopted during the study period. Interior renovations, work not visible from a public way, and paint colors are not subject to review in neighborhood conservation districts.