

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: November 29, 2023
To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director

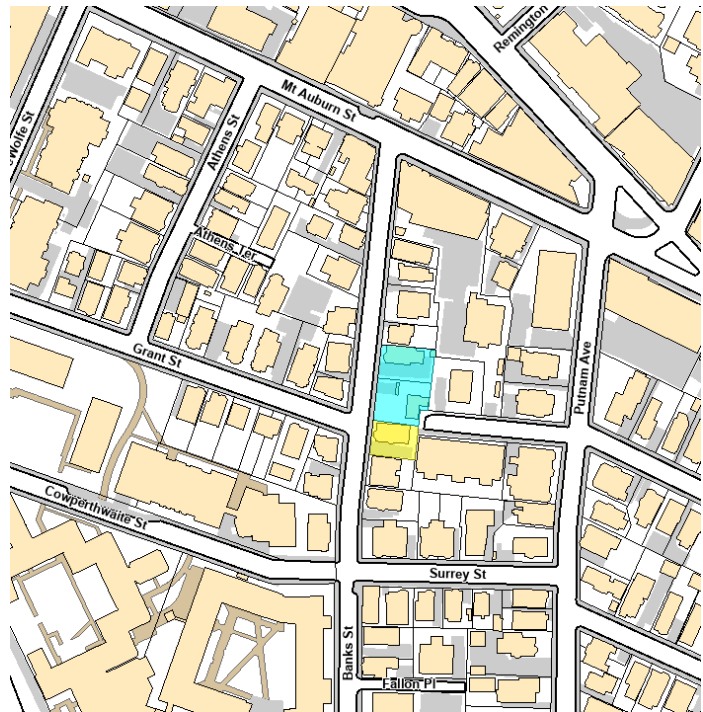
Re: Case D-1670: 38-40 Banks Street (Murphy House, 1892) and 48 Banks Street (Blevins House, 1862)

A demolition application for the buildings at 38-40 and 48 Banks Street was received on November 13, 2023. The property owner, Lubavitch of Cambridge, Inc., was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for December 7, 2023.

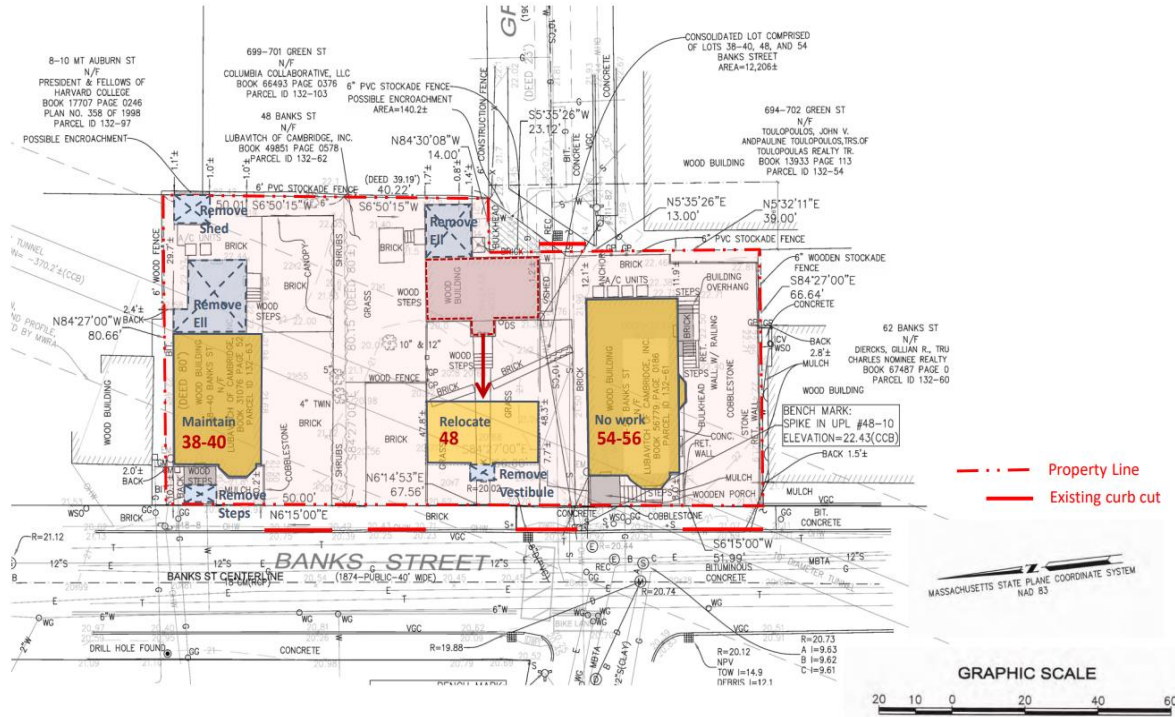
Site

The houses at 38-40 and 48 Banks Street are located on the east side of the street, mid-block between Mount Auburn and Surrey streets. The project would combine the lots at 38-40, 48, and 54-56 Banks Street into a single parcel. 54-56 Banks Street is a single-family parsonage, and no demolition permit is required for that building. The proposed work calls for the renovation and removal of the rear ell at 38-40 Banks Street and the removal of the rear ell, partial demolition of walls and roof, and relocation of the house at 48 Banks Street to the front of its lot to erect a contemporary addition between and behind the existing structures.

The applicant proposes to combine the three lots at 38-56 Banks Street into a single parcel. The three lots at 38-40 Banks Street (Map 132, Lot 63), 48 Banks Street (Map 132, Lot 62) and 54-56 Banks Street (Map 132, Lot 61), combined would comprise a roughly 12,100 square-foot lot. The total assessed value of the three parcels, including land and buildings, is \$5,534,700. The property is in a residential section of the street, surrounded by multi-family dwellings. The structures are within a Residence C-1 zoning district.



Assessing map of 38-40 and 48 Banks Street (highlighted in blue) with 54-56 Banks Street building (highlighted in yellow).



Proposed demolition and relocation plan for 38-56 Banks Street.



38-56 Banks Street, facing south. Note: 48 Banks Street (center) not visible.

Architectural Description and Condition

38-40 Banks Street:

The house at 38-40 Banks Street is a well-preserved Queen Anne style two-family residence. The side hall dwelling is built atop a raised brick foundation with a setback off Banks Street similar to most others on the block. The property has a gable roof with its gable facing the street which is covered in asphalt shingles. A single shed dormer extends off the north-facing slope of the roof. The house is clad with both wood clapboards and shingle siding, with clapboards at the first and second floors and shingles at the gable-end and a band between the first- and second-floor windows. The band of shingles terminates with a flared drip edge with saw-tooth cut shingles. The historic two-door entrance was altered to a single-door with sidelights in a 2000s renovation. The projecting portico was also added as part of the renovation and is supported by two Tuscan columns. A two-story octagonal bay is located on the main façade. All windows are replaced with one-over-one or single-paned windows at the bay. An original two-story rear ell with a flat roof extends off the rear. A narrow, undeveloped lot is located to the south and is presently used for outdoor event space and parking.



38-40 Banks Street



38-40 Banks Street façade and south elevation.

48 Banks Street:

The house at 48 Banks Street is a well-preserved example of a vernacular, mid-19th century workers cottage in Cambridge. The two-story, three-bay house is located at the extreme rear of the lot directly on the lot line and is built atop a short brick foundation. Its siting disrupts the cohesive street edge of 19th and early 20th-century housing on the east side of Banks Street with uniform setbacks. Its façade faces Banks Street with its gable running parallel to the street, providing views of the



48 Banks Street siting.

decorative, tri-colored slate roof laid in a diamond pattern. Two brick chimneys remain. The house is clad in clapboard siding with the original trim details seemingly removed or covered. An enclosed, projecting center entry bay is accessed by wooden stairs. All windows appear to have been replaced, including the addition of a shallow projecting “greenhouse” window to the left of the front door. A two-story ell extends off the northeast half of the rear elevation.

A 2003 permit saw the replacement of the siding and gutters with downspouts running down the middle of the façade. A 1920s metal two-car garage at the street was demolished in 1989 and was replaced by a two-car brick surface parking pad. The remainder of the front yard is minimally landscaped beyond a narrow brick walkway flanked on both sides by a mulch lawn.



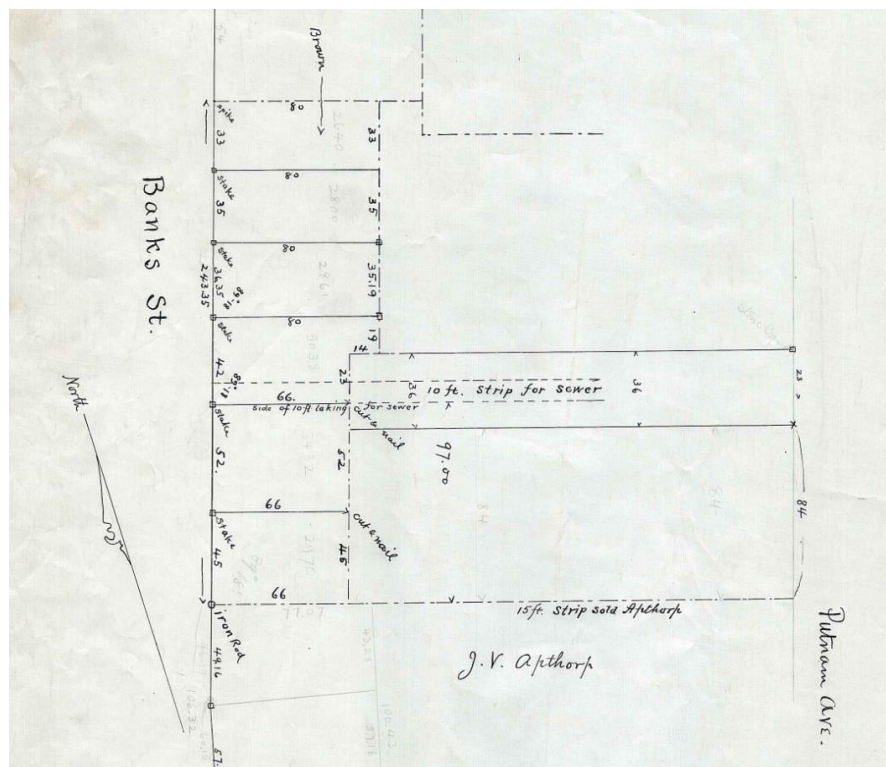
48 Banks Street slate detail, CHC photo 2015.

History

The Banks Street neighborhood (once called the Lower Marsh, then Kerry's Corner), originated as the pre-Revolutionary estate of William Phipps. Phipps' house was located, facing the river, where St Paul's Church (1914) stands today. The property was acquired in 1773 by William Winthrop, a son of the Harvard mathematics professor, James Winthrop.

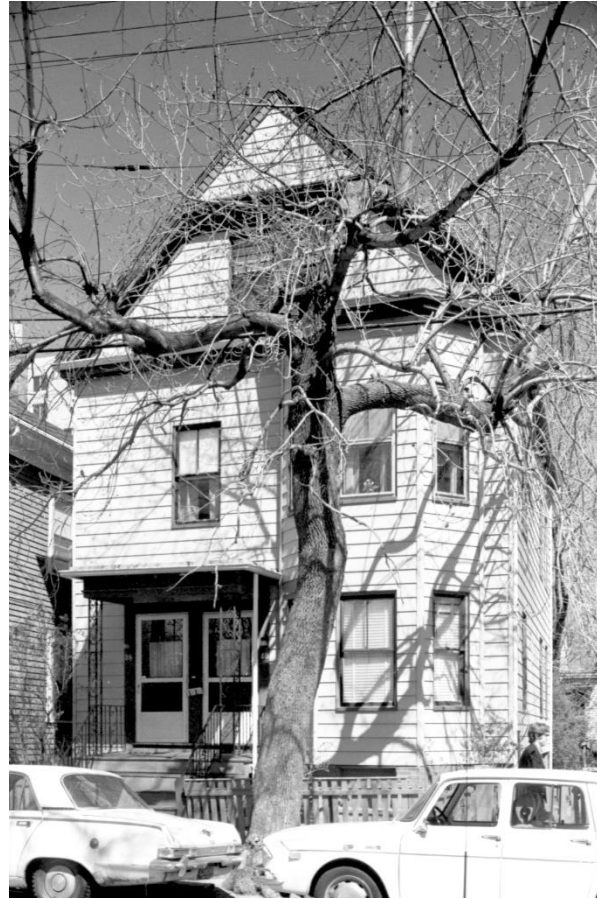
William Winthrop was a merchant and ship owner, and he operated a wharf and dairy farm on the land in front of his house until his death in 1825. Although the farm was first subdivided in 1839, disputes among the heirs delayed development and the property was reassembled in 1855 by James Brown, a partner in the publishing firm of Little, Brown & Company. After Brown's untimely death in 1855, his trustees adopted a subdivision plan with awkwardly shaped lots. This factor, in combination with the adjacent marshes that harbored malarial mosquitoes and the occasional flooding of the Charles River, meant that the Winthrop farm would be developed for working-class housing or industrial development.

Development in the area began slowly in 1856. Several small houses and sheds would be built and sold or rented to laborers, most of which were recent Irish immigrants in this period. On the high ground along Mount Auburn Street, the houses were more elaborate and were occupied by prosperous tradesmen and storekeepers. The neighborhood remained largely working-class through the mid-20th century; all the while Harvard's expansion was seeping into the area. Strong neighborhood opposition and self-determination restricted Harvard's eastward expansion after Leverett Towers were built in the early 1960s. In 2007, eight two- and three-story houses, more in keeping with the neighborhood character, were built for Harvard affiliates on Grant Street and the west side of Banks Street, on lots created for expansion in the 1960s.



1891 Survey of newly platted lots on Banks Street.

38-40 Banks Street: The lot at 38-40 Banks Street was sold by Nathan G. Gooch to Dennis Murphy on April 2, 1889 (Book 1900, Page 452). Three years later, in April 1892, Dennis Murphy received a permit to erect a wooden dwelling (24x34) with Edward J. Cogan listed as the builder. 38-40 Banks Street was built as a duplex. In the 1900 Federal Census, Dennis Murphy, a coachman born in Ireland is listed as residing here with his family. Dennis worked as a driver for wealthy clients, including for Alvin F. Sortwell, the twenty-sixth mayor of Cambridge. Along with Dennis, his wife Margaret, twin 17-year-old daughters Catherine and Mary, and two sons, Daniel and John, all lived at #38 Banks Street. At #40 Banks Street, three generations of Crombie women resided together, Ann Crombie (aged 74) lived here with her daughter, Sarah, and granddaughter, Mary Mullen. By 1910, Dennis Murphy's niece and nephew, Christina and Cornelius (aged 24 and 26 respectively), were residing at #38 Banks Street. At #40 Banks Street, Francis Mahar, a clerk at an express company married Catherine Murphy and resided here with his wife and daughter Eileen.



38-40 Banks Street, CHC Survey photo, 1965.

Throughout the 20th century, the property at 38-40 Banks Street remained in the Murphy and Mahar families. Mary A. Murphy, daughter of Dennis Murphy owned 38 Banks Street until her death in December 1976. Eileen Mahar, the daughter of Francis Mahar and Catherine (Murphy) Mahar, owned Banks Street until her death in 1995. Eileen was born in Cambridge and earned a bachelor's degree from Boston University in 1929, completing graduate studies at the University of Dublin and Harvard-Radcliffe Extension School. She taught Business at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School for 45 years until her retirement. The two-family house at 38-40 Banks Street was then owned in its entirety by Robert D. Murphy, who sold it in 1995 to Halcott G. Grant, Jr. In 2000, the property was again sold to Hirsch and Elka Zarchi, who granted the building to Lubavitch of Cambridge, Inc., a non-profit for \$1.

48 Banks Street:

The house at 48 Banks Street was built in 1862 for owner John Blevins (1829-1871). John was born in Armagh, Ireland and immigrated to Boston in 1857. In Boston, he married Mary Halpin (1831-1913) and settled in Cambridge. He first shows up in city directories living on Foster Street in 1860 and his profession is listed as a “slater”. By 1863, he is listed as residing in the house, which was originally constructed on the west side of Banks Street, at the corner of Crane Street (renamed Grant Street in 1874).

The house was relocated in 1866 to the SW corner of Mount Auburn and Banks streets as seen in the 1873 Hopkins Map. It is probable that at this time, John slated his roof with decorative diamond patterns to advertise his workmanship. The 1870 Federal Census lists John living at the house on Mount Auburn Street (now 48 Banks Street) with his wife Mary, four sons: William, John, Arthur, and James, and daughter Margaret. John Blevins died in 1871, aged 42. Mary sold the property on Mt. Auburn Street in 1874 and relocated the family to Chalk Street. In 1880, the Census lists Mary as keeping house while three of her children worked outside the home: William at a soap factory, John at a printing office, and Margaret as a



1873 Hopkins Atlas showing approximate original location of 48 Banks Street (orange), second location (red) and present location (green).



48 Banks Street, CHC photo 1965.

bookbinder. John would later follow in his late father's footsteps and work as a prominent roof slater, working on Cambridge schools, firehouses, and residences.

The Blevins House was sold by Mary Blevins to Jane Wilson in 1874. By the 1880s, as land values along Mount Auburn Street increased due to commercial development, Joseph Lerner purchased the corner lot at Banks Street, renting the house for a few years until he sought to redevelop the lot. In 1892, he hired William P. and J.R. Richards, architects, to design a wooden student dormitory on the site (now 12 Mount Auburn St). He had the former Blevins House relocated by 1893 to newly platted house lots on the east side of Banks Street by Joshua G. Gooch. The Blevins House was moved to 48 Banks Street and positioned at the extreme rear of the lot, possibly with the opportunity to build another structure at the street, though this never occurred. 48 Banks Street was purchased by Mary Agnes (Hooley) Sullivan, a widow, in 1893. Mary died in 1907 and the property was bought and sold several times in the following decades. In 1926, owner Helen Gardner received a permit to build a two-car garage in the front yard. The garage was demolished in 1989. During the Great Depression, the Cambridge Savings Bank took possession of the property and sold it in 1935 to Ethel C. Daley.

Significance and Recommendation

The houses at 38-40 and 48 Banks Street are significant for their connections with the redevelopment of the Phipps farm in the early to mid-19th century for working-class Irish families and significant architecturally as well-preserved Queen Anne and Italianate vernacular homes. The Commission should hear testimony from the applicant and neighbors and review the plans for selective demolition, relocation, and new construction before making a further determination.

cc:

Lubavitch of Cambridge, Inc.
Peter McLaughlin, Cambridge Inspectional Services