



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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October 29, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director
 Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

Re: L-138: John L. Malcolm Triple-decker, 68-70 Lexington Avenue (1913)

An application to demolish the building at 68-70 Lexington Avenue was received on September 2, 2020. The applicant, Gregory Scott Burd, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for October 1, 2020 (Case D-1557).

At the October 1, 2020, public hearing, the Cambridge Historical Commission found the John L. Malcolm Triple-decker at 68-70 Lexington Avenue to be significant and preferably preserved. The Commission's practice is to hold a hearing in the final month of the delay period to evaluate the potential of a property for landmark designation. On August 18, 2021 the property owners submitted a written request to extend the demolition delay period for three months so they could work on a revised proposal for a replacement project and reach out again to their neighbors. A hearing was scheduled for November 4, 2021 to consider that revised proposal and the question of whether to initiate a landmark study for the property.

Site

The structure is located on the west side of Lexington Avenue mid-block between Brattle Street and Huron Avenue. The three-story triple-decker frame house sits on a stone foundation. The 2020 assessed value for the land and building was \$1,982,100.

The structure is sited on a 5,306 square-foot lot in a Residence B zoning district. The zoning allows one- and two-family construction with an FAR of 0.5 and a height limit of 35 feet. A driveway is located at the north side of the property terminating at a detached garage.

The owners of 68-70 Lexington Avenue live next door at no. 72, a single-family house constructed in 2013 on the site of no. 72-74, a house that was destroyed by fire. The original structure was a twin to no. 68-70. In 2020 the applicant proposed to demolish the existing structure at no. 68-70 and replace it with a two-story dwelling of a design similar style to their own home at no. 72. The

applicants also planned to remove the rear garage and replace it with surface parking, if required by zoning.



68-70 Lexington Avenue, CHC Photograph 09-2020.

Architectural Description

The house at 68-70 Lexington Avenue, built in 1913, is a 3½-story triple-decker on a stone foundation that displays a blend of two architectural styles. Its asymmetrical façade and dominant front-facing gable slightly projecting over the stories below are in the Queen Anne style, while the shingle-siding, which continuously runs along the various bays and projections, represents the Shingle style.

The house features a prominent gambrel roof with shed dormers on both sides. A projecting porch supported by fluted square columns runs along the full length of the front and shelters two front doors with oval lights. A two-story octagonal bay projects from the façade on the first and second floors.



68-70 Lexington Avenue, front porch and door detail. CHC photo, 2020.

At the third floor, a shingled oriel window is located above the two-story octagonal bay, terminating at the gambrel roofline above and flared eaves below. An inset porch on the third story behind an arched opening has been enclosed with a window grid slightly behind the wall plane. In the half-story above, a double-hung window is placed centrally at the gable end.



68-70 Lexington Avenue, fenestration and third floor detail. CHC photo, 2020.

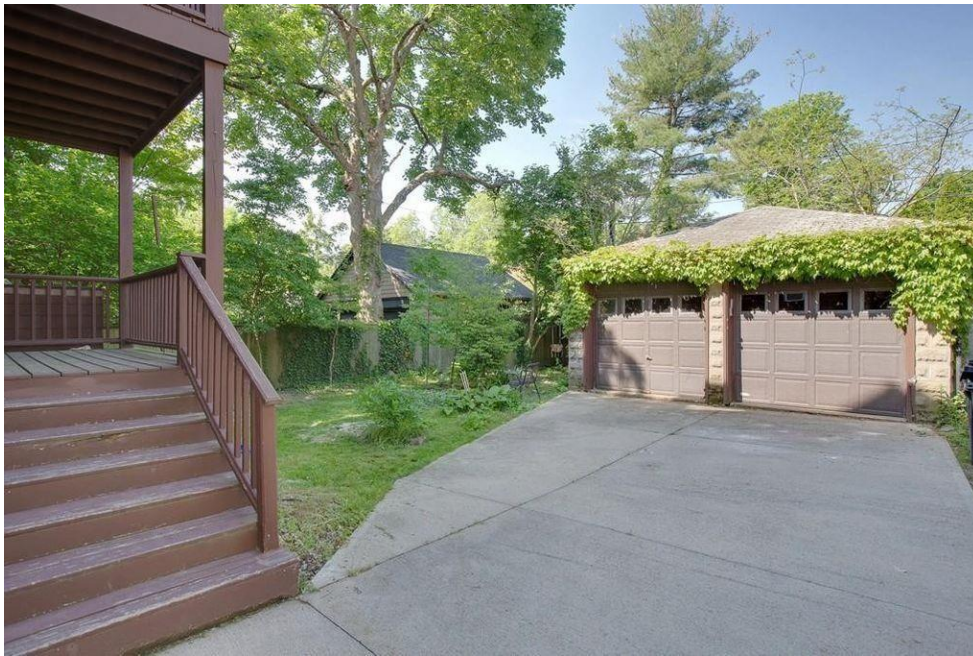
On the south side elevation, a two-story octagonal bay extends between the first and second floors, ending at the roof eave. On the north side, a small, shingled oriel window at the first-floor level replicates the oriel on the façade. At the rear elevation, three small wood-frame decks are not visible from the street.



68-70 Lexington Avenue, rear decks. Image from real estate listing 2020.

A two-car detached garage is located at the rear of the lot at the end of the asphalt driveway. The garage was built in 1930 of rusticated concrete blocks. A shallow hipped roof with overhanging eaves rises above the square structure.

Alterations to the property have been limited. Replacement windows in varied light configurations, materials and colors have been added to the property but appear to match the historical openings. A building permit from 1992 to replace the porches likely coincides with the removal of the detailed balusters on the second and third floors at the façade as well as the replacement of the shingled first floor porch. The porch steps appear to have been re-oriented at that time, from the front to side. The front yard is enclosed by a small wooden fence.



Detached concrete block garage at rear yard. Image from real estate listing 2020.

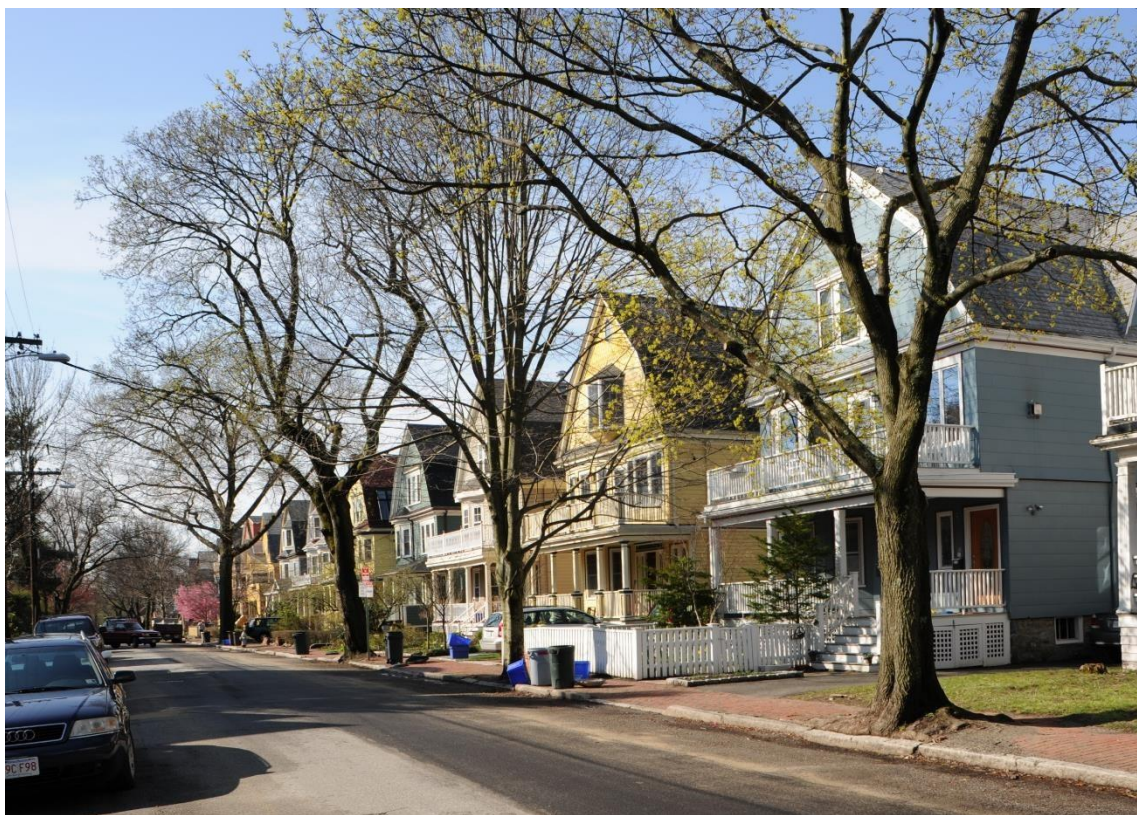
History

Lexington Avenue is named after the town of the same name. The street was laid out in 1872 from Brattle Street to what is now Fresh Pond Parkway.

The land that became Lexington Avenue was purchased by Joshua Coolidge in 1816 and stretched from Brattle Street to Fresh Pond. In 1832, he divided the property between his sons, Joshua Jr. and Josiah; the latter acquired his brother's share in 1839. In 1870, Josiah Coolidge sold the property to the developers Person Davis, T. Alfred Taylor, and Reuben Demmon, who surveyed it the same year. In 1871 they platted a subdivision that ignored the natural topography and instead created thirty-five large house lots, mostly 100 feet wide, along two parallel streets that became Lake View and Lexington avenues.

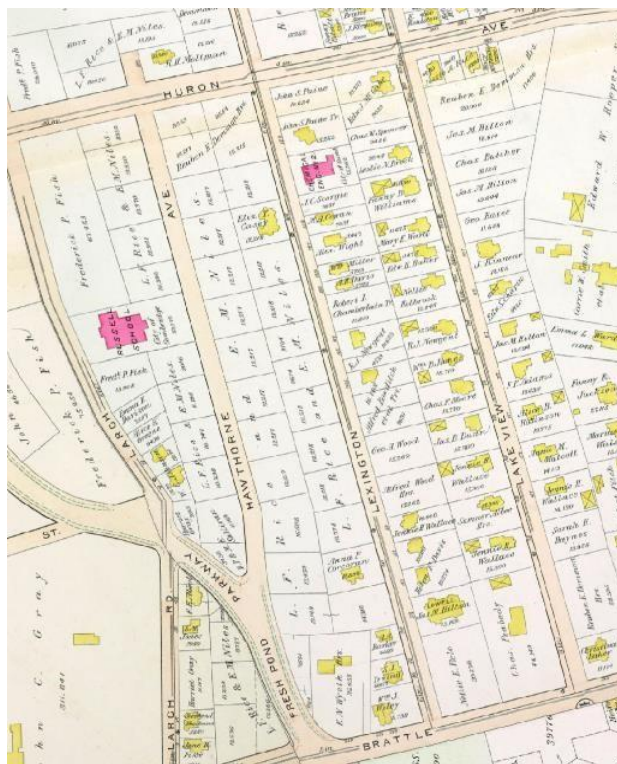
In 1873, developers Stephen Niles and Lewis Rice of Boston purchased land to the west and laid out the west side of Lexington Avenue and enlarged the grid to Hawthorne Avenue (renamed Grozier Road). Davis and Taylor's lots on their east side of Lexington, platted in 1871 were 15,000 square foot lots like those seen on Lake View; while the west side of the street, platted and stalled due to the Panic of 1873, developed more slowly.

Between 1873 and 1894, just one house had been built on the west side of Lexington Avenue, #30 (1886). In 1894, with the beginning of streetcar service along Huron Avenue, construction began to boom just north of Brattle Street. By 1903, three additional dwellings were constructed on the west side of Lexington Avenue, with the east side filling in with some larger lots conveyed to smaller house lots, along with the fire station constructed at #167 (1893).

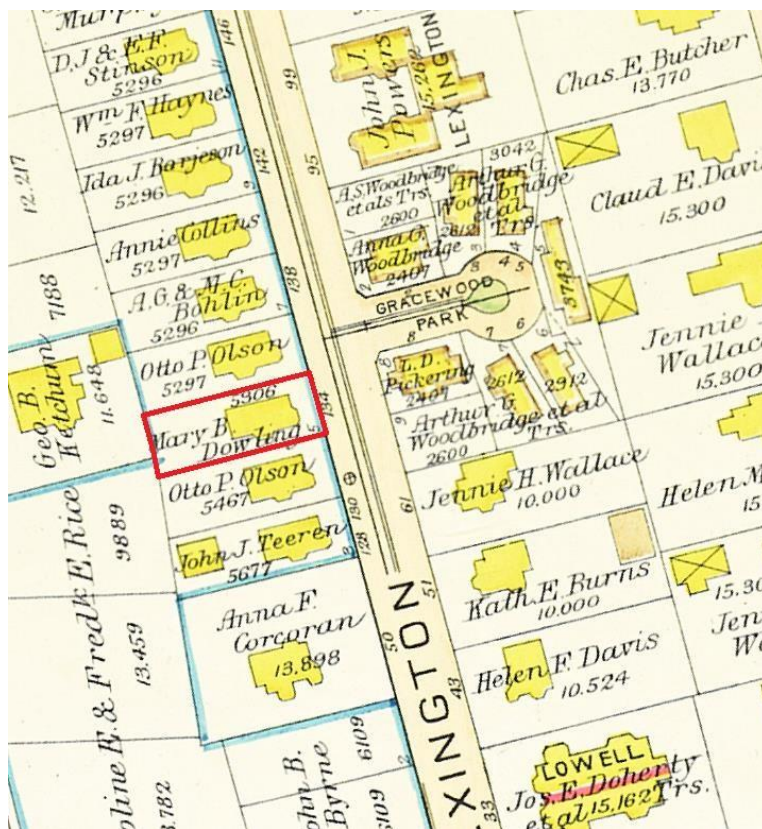


Lexington Avenue, even side, south facing. CHC photo 2009.

In the 20th century, the character of Lexington Avenue shifted from a single-family neighborhood to a denser, multi-family area with the infill construction of apartment houses and duplexes in the 20th century. The Lowell, a high-style triple-decker, was constructed at 33 Lexington Avenue in 1900, and the Lexington, a 1911 stucco apartment building, was built at no.95-99. Seeing this shift in desired housing, the builder John L. Malcolm re-platted the old Niles and Rice subdivision on the west side of Lexington Avenue into narrow, 5,000 square foot lots. Malcolm, who was both owner and builder, hired architect Elmer Buckley in 1912 to design sixteen gambrel-roofed duplexes and triple-deckers on the newly platted lots, creating an extremely cohesive collection of housing, not seen elsewhere in Cambridge.



1903 Bromley Map showing Lexington Street area under development.



1916 Bromley Map with 68-70 Lexington Avenue (outlined in red).

After the collection of houses were built, they were sold by John Malcolm to buyers. No. 68-70 Lexington (then 134) was purchased by Mary B. Dowling, a widow living in Allston, who rented out the three units. Ms. Dowling later moved in with her son, Edward S. Dowling, who resided at 21 Rockwell Street. Edward Dowling worked as the armorer at the Cambridge Armory on Massachusetts Avenue between 1901 and 1939.

Thomas H. Brundage bought the house in 1919; he lived in one unit and rented the other twos. Brundage was listed in the directories as a furniture maker and then as a foreman. It is not known where Brundage was employed. In 1943 the Cambridge Victory Garden Committee awarded Mrs. T. H. Brundage of 70 Lexington Avenue one of the nine new victory garden plots at Huron Avenue and Fresh Pond Parkway.

By 1968 the property was owned by Harriet T. Provine, a research technician at Massachusetts General Hospital. She lived in one unit and appears to have rented the other units and appears to have owned the property until her death in 2020.



1969 image of 68-70 Lexington Avenue, CHC Survey Photo.



68-70 Lexington (left) and 72 Lexington (right), CHC Photograph 1984. Note: 72 Lexington since demolished.

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)

The purpose of landmark designation 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)

Relationship to Criteria

Staff considers that the John L. Malcolm Triple-decker at 68-70 Lexington Avenue meets criterion (1) for its important associations “with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth.” The property can be considered to meet criterion (2) as architecturally significant in terms of its period and style within the context of the streetscape of similarly designed homes on the west side of Lexington Avenue, developed by John L. Malcolm.

Staff Recommendations

The John L. Malcolm Triple-decker is an important example of a multi-family house in West Cambridge, built as speculative housing as part of a larger development. Its primary significance derives from its contribution to the surrounding context of the streetscape of similar homes on Lexington Avenue.

The importance of the John L. Malcolm Triple-decker to the preservation of the Lexington Avenue streetscape is sufficient to justify its study for designation as a Cambridge landmark.

cc: Greg Burd and Francesca Gino
James J. Rafferty, Esq.