



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Bruce A. Irving, *Chair*, Susannah Barton Tobin, *Vice Chair*; Charles M. Sullivan, *Executive Director*  
Joseph V. Ferrara, Chandra Harrington, Elizabeth Lyster, Caroline Shannon, Jo M. Solet, *Members*  
Gavin W. Kleespies, Paula A. Paris, Kyle Sheffield, *Alternates*

April 1, 2022

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Landmark Evaluation, 21 Loomis Street

On May 6, 2021 the Historical Commission determined that the John P. Mearn house at 21 Loomis Street was significant and preferably preserved under Ch. 2.28, Art. III, the demolition delay ordinance. The owner's application for a demolition permit was thereby suspended for a year to see if an alternative to demolition could be found. The Commission's practice is to hold a public hearing in the eleventh month of a delay to consider whether to initiate a landmark designation study for the property.

The history and significance of the John P. Mearn house is described in the attached memo. Since the Commission determination in May 2021 CHC staff have made periodic contact with the proponents to discuss alternatives to demolition. There was an inconclusive discussion of the possibility of building a detached house in the back yard, but nothing was resolved. The developers who are the proponents of the project have had some discussions with neighbors but do not think they could achieve support for a project that would require a variance.

The effect of initiating a landmark designation study would be to maintain the Commission's jurisdiction over the property for up to one year while a study is made of its suitability for permanent protection. At the conclusion of the study the Commission would hold a public hearing to consider whether to recommend designation to the City Council. If the Council enacts the designation the property would remain under Commission jurisdiction, and no publicly visible alteration or construction could take place on the premises without a Certificate of Appropriateness, Nonapplicability, of Hardship.

### 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

The Cape Cod Style John P. Mearn house is significant as one of the first houses built in Cambridge after World War II and as a precursor of the postwar suburban development of Cambridge Highlands. While houses of this type can be found throughout Massachusetts, they are not commonly found in Cambridge outside this immediate neighborhood.

Staff contends that the John P. Mearn house at 21 Loomis Street could be considered to meet 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 also be considered to meet criterion (2) as architecturally significant in terms of its period and style within the context of the newly developing Cambridge Highlands neighborhood.

#### Staff Recommendations

Staff recommends that the Commission review the record of the case and hear public testimony before deciding whether to initiate a landmark designation study.

cc: Kelli Bennett  
Kevin Emery  
Eamon Fee



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May 1, 2021

To: Cambridge Historical Commission  
From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director  
Re: D-1575: John P. Mearn House, 21 Loomis Street (21 Loomis Street (1949))

An application to demolish the single-family house at 21 Loomis Street was received on March 15, 2021. The applicant, Kelli Bennett, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for May 6, 2021.



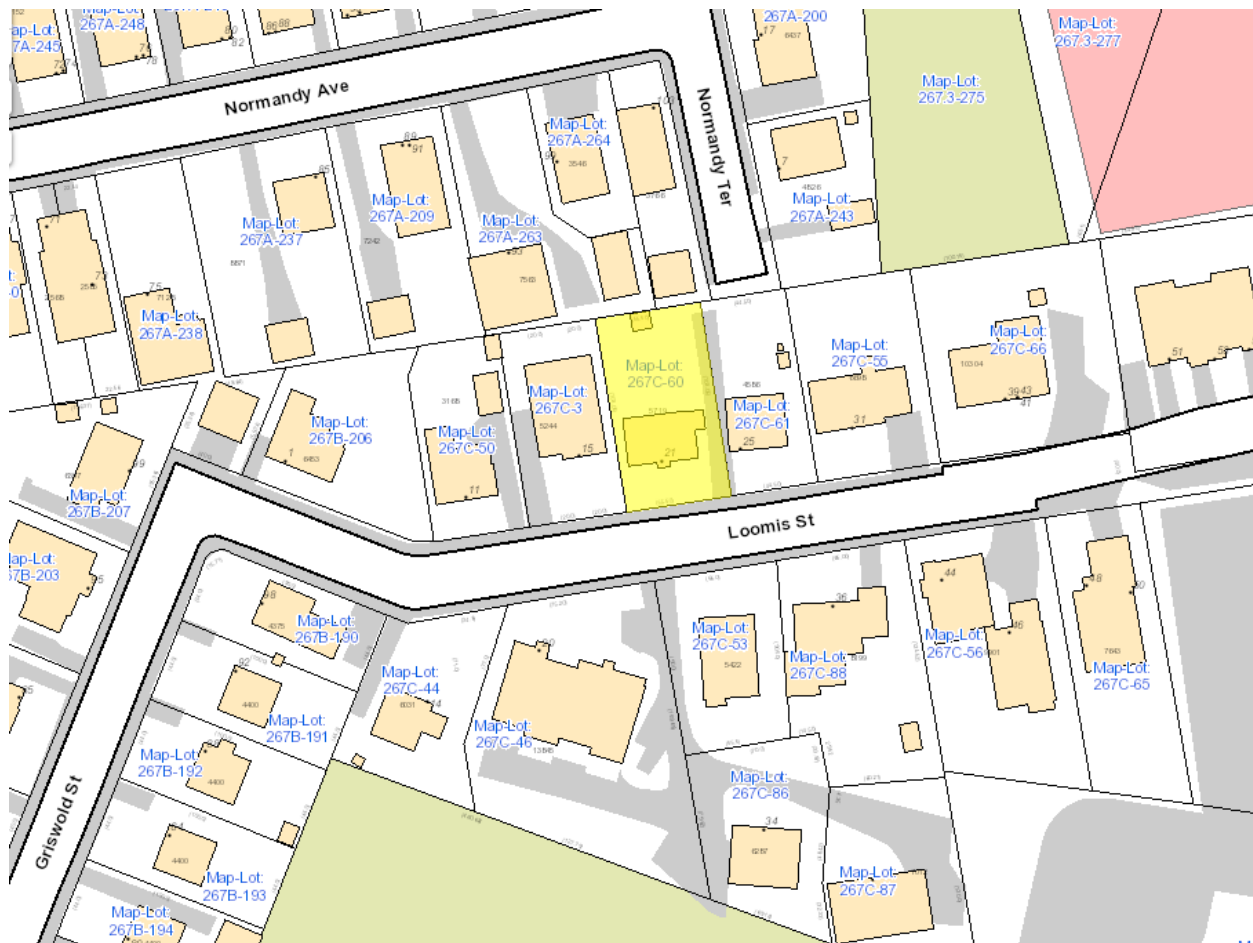
21 Loomis Street

Assessors photo

### General Description and Current Condition

The John P. Mearn house is a 1½ story frame dwelling located on the north side of Loomis Street. The lot measures 5,718 square-foot lot (Assessor's Map 267C/Lot 60) and is in a Residence B zoning

district. The Residence B district permits two-family construction and has a height limit of 35 feet and a Floor Area Ratio of 0.50. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the online assessor's property database, is \$956,000, of which \$596,500 is attributable to the land and \$359,500 is attributable to the house.



Assessor's Map, Cambridge GIS, 2021 (21 Loomis Street highlighted in yellow)

The Mearn house is situated near the front of the lot and appears to have non-conforming side setbacks. A curb cut and driveway (shared via an easement with the abutter to the east) are located on the right side of the house. The gable-roofed house is situated with its broad side toward the street and the front door faces south.

The Assessors rate the interior and exterior condition of the house as “good” and the overall condition as “average”. The applicants propose to construct a new duplex home and maintain the existing curb cut and driveway. Plans are on file and have been distributed to the Commissioners.

### Description

The house at 21 Loomis Street is a 1½-story Cape built in 1949. The footprint of the house measures 24' by 36'; it contains five rooms, including three bedrooms and one bath, with 862 SF of living area per floor. The house has a center-entrance plan and a five-bay façade. There are two substantial dormers on the street-facing gable roof. The exterior is covered with aluminum siding; the original exterior material is not known. The 6+1 windows appear to be replacements; the shutters are fixed in place. The front door is protected by a simple porch roof with square posts that appears to be a replacement for the aluminum canopy seen in early photos.



21 Loomis Street

CHC staff photo 1975

The Mearn house is a textbook example of the Cape Cod house type that was built by the thousands across the Northeast after World War II. The architect of record, Grossman & Sons, was a major regional distributor of building supplies, and the house at 21 Loomis would have been a stock plan for which Grossman would have supplied all the lumber and materials. Strangely, this is the only house in Cambridge credited to this firm, although there is a very similar Cape nearby credited to James Rice, an engineer who often stamped plans prepared by others.

**DATA:** Living Area, 1,330 Sq. Ft.; Cubage, 18,685 Cu. Ft.; Ceiling Height—1st Floor, 8 Ft., 2nd Floor, 7½ Ft.; Basement Height, 7 Ft.

Although not a large home this modern Colonial contains five rooms which are planned in a most efficient and conventional manner. The large living room extends from the front to the rear and it has a natural fireplace and French doors which may open out upon a garden terrace if desired. There is a full dining room and the cheerful attractive dining bay in the kitchen will save many minutes and steps. There is a full bath upstairs and downstairs is a much desired powder room. The plans provide for a full basement.

**Tradition**

TRADITIONAL CHARM  
IN BRICK

Second Floor Plan

First Floor Plan

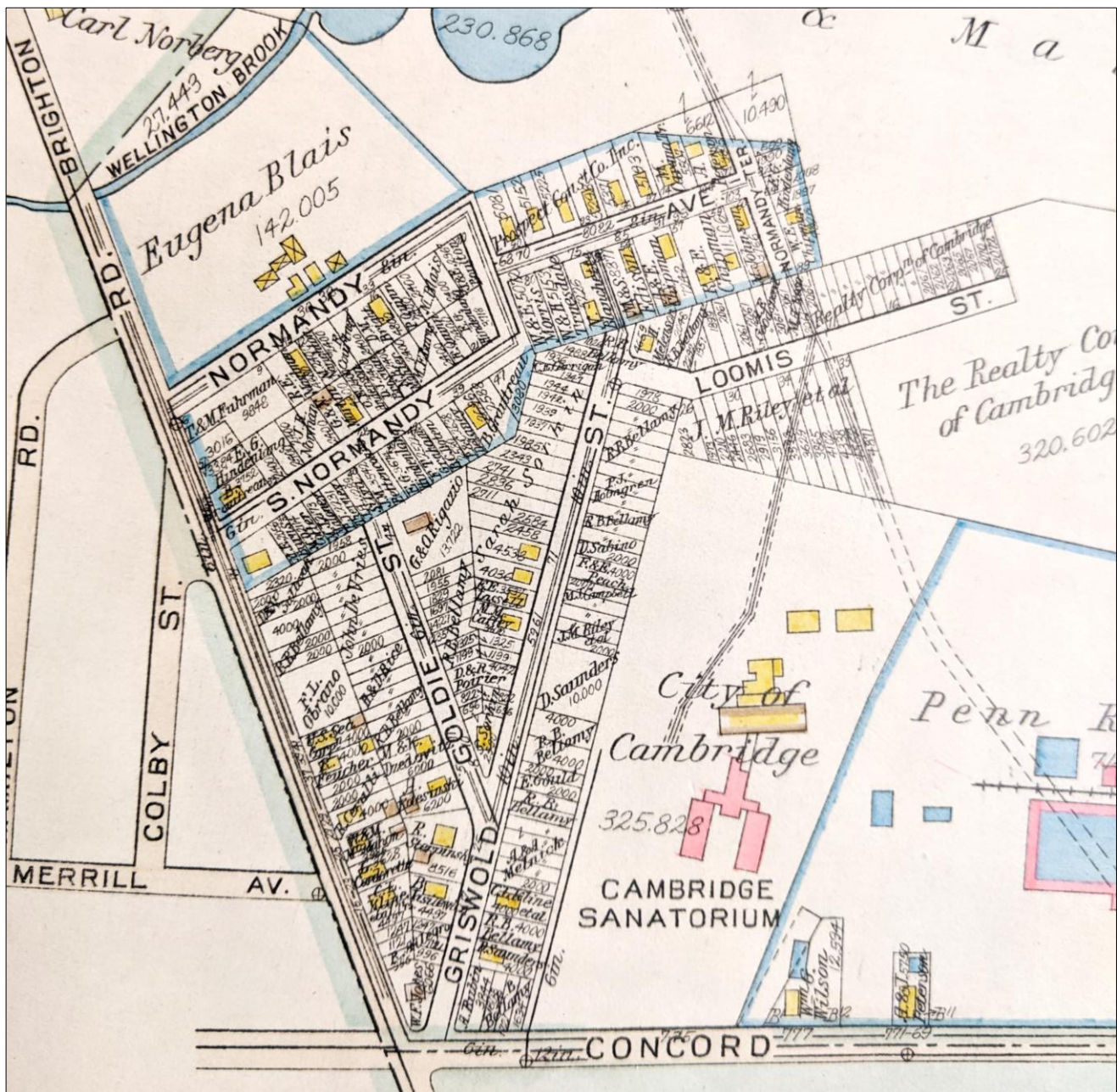
Cape Cod house plan, date unknown

<https://www.thespruce.com/cape-cod-house-plans-177537>

## History

The neighborhood known today as Cambridge Highlands was described in the Cambridge Historical Commission's *Report Five: Northwest Cambridge* (1977):

“At the turn of the 20th century the colonial farmland around the western rim of Fresh Pond offered the last suitable area for residential development in Northwest Cambridge. Annexed from Belmont in 1880 and isolated by swamps, railroads, and brickyards, the area had remained unaffected by suburban pressure until 1906, when the Belmont trolley line was opened on Grove Street and Concord Avenue. Even then, real growth did not take place for another forty years, and the Fresh Pond area emerged as the one true example of the automobile suburb in the City, comparable in its physical characteristics to adjacent Belmont and Arlington.



Cambridge Highlands after subdivision, 1930

Bromley Atlas, CHC



Cambridge Chronicle, Aug. 12, 1916

“The present neighborhood of Cambridge Highlands was formed just prior to the First World War from the Richardson-Frost farmstead on Blanchard Street between the Tuberculosis Sanitarium and Hills Crossing. In 1916 E. G. Hinderland laid out 80 lots on two streets patriotically named after Normandy, France. The remaining portion was platted the next year as "Cambridge Gardens" by the Griswold Land Company of Revere (Fig. 69), with over two hundred small house lots on Griswold, Goldie (Sunset) and Loomis Streets.

“Initial development was delayed by the Great War, and by 1925 only a dozen small bungalows had been erected in the area. The establishment of the motor bus route along Concord Avenue in 1928 encouraged tract builders like Elmer Clow

from North Cambridge to construct two-family houses. Public transportation was further improved with bus lines on Blanchard Street in 1934.



Griswold Land Co. office, Concord Avenue at Griswold Street, 1921

CHC

“Full development of Cambridge Highlands as an automobile suburb began during the brief war-time prosperity between 1939 and 1942, when builders like Murray K. Fine erected a score of modest single-family homes. The building pattern was resumed in 1948 and continued over the next decade, and the neighborhood emerged as the home of young veterans, many of whom worked for the City. By the early 1960s most of the open land had been developed, and builders turned to multiple family house types, which were squeezed onto the remaining lots. The most dramatic example of this recent trend was the construction of a garden apartment house and retail complex on Blanchard Road at Normandy Avenue in 1974. This had been the last fragment of colonial agricultural landscape in Cambridge. Originally part of the Holden-Richardson farm, the house and barn at 30 Normandy Avenue had been built for Thomas Richardson after the Civil War (Figs. 70 and 71), and the land had been cultivated as a truck garden until 1946.”

Loomis Street was the last section of the Highlands to be developed; only one house on Loomis predates World War II. Each of the 35 lots that the Griswold Co. laid out on the street contained only about 2,000 SF and had only 20' of street frontage. No houses had been erected there when the city took them all for unpaid taxes in 1931. This type of subdivision could only have been viable with long rows of attached houses, but none of these were ever built.

The first wave of construction began soon after the war, when returning veterans took advantage of federally-insured mortgages to erect single-family houses on consolidated lots. In 1948 John P. Mearn and his wife Ruth purchased five of the old Griswold lots and consolidated them into one 10,305 sf parcel, where in the spring of 1949 they broke ground on the present house at 21 Loomis Street that the assessors valued at \$6,000 (plus \$500 for the land). This is now the second oldest house on the street



21 Loomis Street under construction, as seen from the roof of the Cambridge Sanatorium, 1949

CHC

In 1952 the Planning Board published “A Plan for Cambridge Highlands”, which noted that the many homes built since WWII were well kept, but that the neighborhood needed paved streets, sidewalks, and street trees; accordingly, the City accepted Loomis as a public way in 1952 and presumably the present magnificent oaks that line the street were planted at that time. Three houses followed in the 1950s and five more in the 1960s, giving Loomis its current suburban character. By 1975 almost all the lots had been consolidated and there were only ten houses on the street. A four unit townhouse at 20 Loomis built in 2004 and two three-unit townhouses put up on an extension of the street in 2011 have not diluted the feeling of an intact post-war suburban street, with mostly one- and two story houses with uniform setbacks in a pleasing variety of styles

John P. Mearn was born in Syracuse, N.Y. in 1909. In the 1940 census the Mearns were living in Dorchester; John, an iron worker, was drafted into the military in 1943 and served until 1945. After the family moved to Cambridge he worked as a deliveryman for the R.G. Mearn Co. of Boston, a dealer in construction equipment.



In 1965 the Mearns subdivided their lot so that their daughter Francine and her husband James H. Sousa could build the Garrison Colonial house next door. They laid out a common driveway protected by an easement along the property line.



21 Loomis Street (1949) and 25 Loomis Street (1965)

CHC

John Mearn died in 1978 and Ruth followed him in 1988. Their son, John P. Mearn Jr., a Cambridge police officer, and his wife Nancy are (according to the Assessors) still the owners of record.

### Significance and Recommendation

The John P. Mearn house at 21 Loomis Street is significant for its associations with the social history of the city and the Mearn family in a neighborhood that is one of Cambridge's two post-war subdivisions (the other being Blanchard Road). The house is also significant for its architecture as a representative example of the Cape Cod style in Cambridge. The staff recommends that the structure be found significant for these reasons.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services  
Kelli Bennett



15, 21, and 25 Loomis Street, ca. 1975

CHC photo