



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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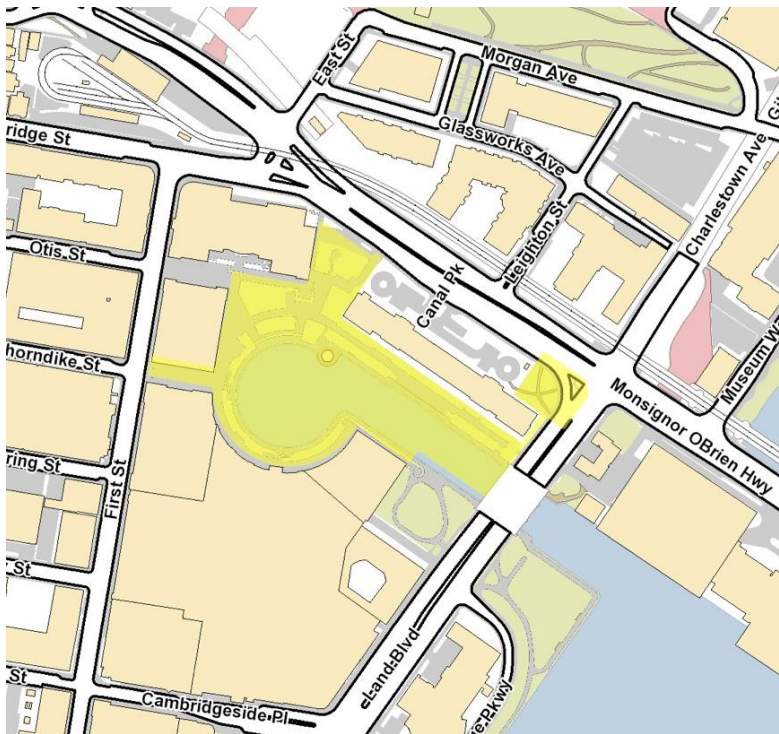
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February 26, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission  
From: Allison Crosbie, Preservation Administrator  
Charles Sullivan, Executive Director  
Re: Landmark Petition, Lechmere Canal Park, East Cambridge

### Background

A petition with twenty-two signatures was received on December 15, 2020 requesting that the Historical Commission initiate a landmark designation study of Lechmere Canal Park in East Cambridge. The Cambridge Election Commission has verified that more than ten of the signatories were registered voters.



Lechmere Canal Park, East Cambridge, City-owned portion in yellow. (City of Cambridge GIS)

The main body of the park occupies about 3.9 acres (Map 8/Parcel 90) and is owned by the City of Cambridge. The assessed value is \$12,296,900. An adjoining portion of the park encompassing 0.8 acres (Map9/Parcel 40) is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Division of Conservation and Recreation. The park is zoned as open space.



*Figure 1 Aerial view of Lechmere Canal Park. (The Cultural Landscape Foundation)*

### 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 Commission may decline to accept petitions that do not meet the criteria for landmark designation.

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 Lechmere Canal was created in 1895 by filling in the tidal flats south and east of the East Cambridge waterfront and functioned as an active seaport for Boston Harbor until the 1950s. The canal fell into disuse and the surrounding industrial area became blighted after WWII. In 1978, the City adopted the *East Cambridge Riverfront Plan* to revitalize the neighborhood with commercial and residential development. The plan set nine objectives, including “transform the Lechmere Canal into the focal point of an animated and unique public space surrounded by retail activity and residential use.” In 1979, an \$800,000 Urban Self-Help Grant from the State Department of Environmental Affairs was used to purchase land around Lechmere Canal for public open space (*Cambridge Chronicle*, January 22, 1981).

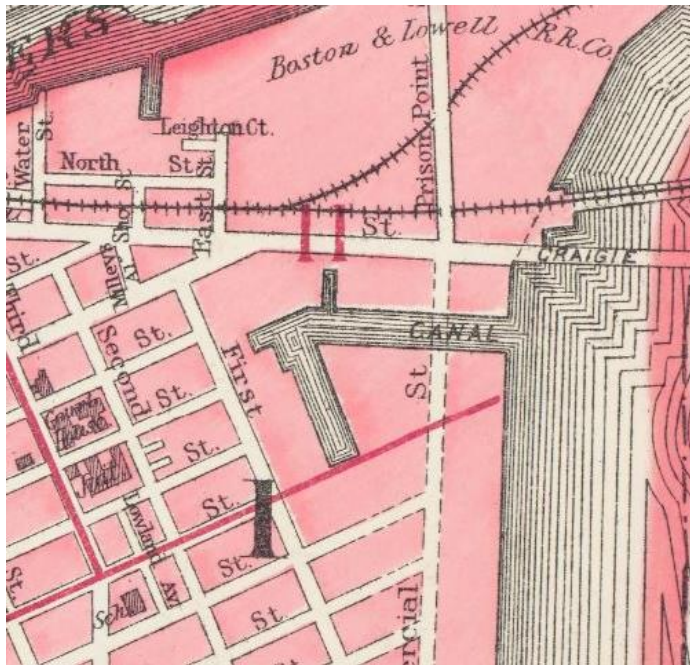


Figure 2 Lechmere Canal, 1903 Bromley Atlas.

The East Cambridge Riverfront Plan envisioned that filling in the south leg of the canal and landscaping the remainder with public funds would attract private development and revitalize the area. This vision was realized with the construction of Thomas Graves Landing (4-6 Canal Park)

in 1985 and the CambridgeSide Galleria in 1988-90. The latter project occupied a ten-acre site and entailed the construction of a mixed-use enclosed mall with three anchor stores, many small shops, and a parking garage.

Cambridge landscape architect Carol R. Johnson (1929-2020) and her firm, Carol R. Johnson & Associates (CRJA), were commissioned to design the 7.5-acre park. Johnson earned her master's degree in landscape architecture from Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1957 and was one of the first landscape architects hired by The Architects Collaborative (TAC), the renowned architectural practice founded by Walter Gropius. After only one year, Johnson started her own practice. Early projects included the landscape of the U.S. Pavilion at Montreal's Expo '67, where she collaborated with Buckminster Fuller and Cambridge Seven Associates.

Johnson had a small office at 15 Mount Auburn Street in Harvard Square. As the practice expanded, she moved her office in 1986 to 1100 Massachusetts Avenue. CRJA worked on a range of public and private projects, including the planning and design of urban spaces and campuses and the transformation of industrial sites and waterfronts into popular parks and public spaces. Through the years, the firm developed an international clientele with projects in Abu Dhabi, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Johnson was made a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in 1982, and in 1998 she received the ASLA Medal for her lifetime achievements and contributions to the profession. CRJA relocated to Boston in 2001, and in 2011 it was acquired by the IBI Group of professional service companies.

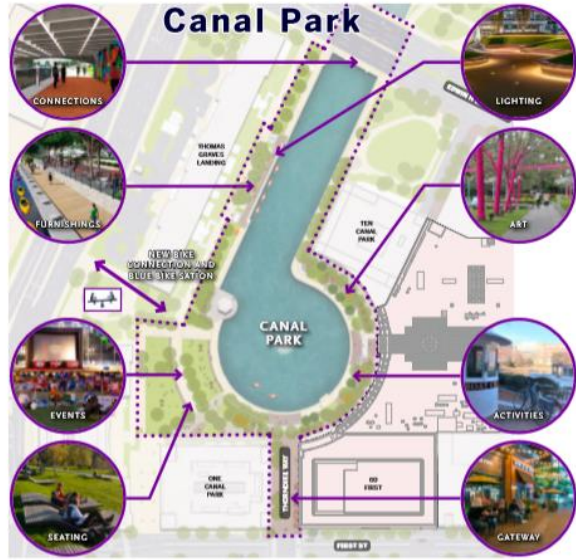
Lechmere Canal Park is one of several reclamation projects completed by CRJA along with Mystic River Reservation in Medford, John F. Kennedy Park in Cambridge, Old Harbor Park in Dorchester, and John Marshall Park in Washington D.C.

The park was developed in two phases beginning with the reconstruction of the canal walls, utilities, and grading. The second phase included finished grading, landscaping, paving, and lighting. The park encompasses both sides of the canal and connects with the Charles River walkway. The canal was edged with sunken stone dust paths and grass berms to maximize the length of the greenspace. Tree plantings included weeping willows, sycamores, and red maples spaced at regular intervals and interspersed with evergreen shrubs, ornamental grasses, and groundcovers. The canal is 100 feet by 500 feet long, terminating at a circular basin measuring 240 in diameter with a jet fountain in the center. The water jet was designed to rise up 160 feet and aerate up to 350 gallons of river water per minute at normal flow, increasing dissolved oxygen in the water. The original master plan called for a larger basin, but Johnson recommended reducing the size to provide more space for people to get close to the water. A seawall at the basin provided docking for light watercraft. A secondary circulation network composed of a raised brick path provided direct access to the surrounding buildings. Other features include a small stepped amphitheater and open-air pavilion with interpretive panels on the industrial history of the canal. Wooden benches line the pathways, and moveable tables and chairs provide seating in the retail areas. More than 200 residential units overlook the canal while offices overlook the park on the south and west.

The park is managed by the City of Cambridge Public Works Department, which contracts out the work to a private company responsible for maintaining it according to specifications prepared by the city's landscape architect. The park is also overseen by the Lechmere Canal Park Committee, comprised of representatives of properties abutting the park. The Committee advises the City on maintenance and helps develop long-range policies to maintain and preserve the park.







### Wellness

- Enhanced **Canal Park** and **streetscape improvements** provide shade and more opportunities to enjoy the **public realm**
- Residents, employees and guests benefit from nearby **parks, playgrounds,** and the **new pocket parks on First Street**



NEW ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT ELKUS MANFREDI ARCHITECTS CS







Figures 4-6. New England Development Open Space Plan

#### Staff Recommendation

The East Cambridge Riverfront Plan of 1978 was a visionary document that accurately foresaw the redevelopment of a derelict area of the city into a vibrant commercial and open space district. Carol Johnson's execution of that vision in the mid-1980s was exceptionally well-designed, and the landscape has matured into an urban space of great beauty.

The petitioners for landmark designation object to the alterations proposed by New England Development as inconsistent with Carol Johnson's design. However, the developer's proposals are almost entirely conjectural. According to Community Development Department staff there has been no submittal of plans for review, and none are anticipated in the immediate future as the developer concentrates on redevelopment of the CambridgeSide site. While the review process has not begun, CDD staff anticipate that the developer will be required to hold community meetings to review the design. City staff will seek to ensure that changes are of high quality and consistent with the public interest.

The criteria for landmark designation in Ch. 2.78 Art. III do not reference a date for consideration of eligibility, but in all but the most exceptional cases fifty years is the minimum age at which designation can be considered. While the Lechmere Canal Park is potentially eligible for landmark designation under criterion (1) for its associations with the cultural, economic, and social history of the city, and under criterion (2) for its architectural significance in terms of its association with landscape architect Carol R. Johnson, it has been in place for only 35 years and thus does not qualify under normal criteria.

Second, the danger of inappropriate alterations to the park is only conjectural. The developer does not control the site, which is owned by the City of Cambridge and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The city has not conducted its own evaluation of site conditions and desirable improvements, and the developer had not submitted specific plans for review. When plans are developed there will be sufficient opportunity for public review and comment. CHC staff will be able to participate in that review and recommend designation if necessary.

The staff recommend that the Commission decline to accept the petition as untimely and unwarranted. In the absence of a present danger to the landscape, preparation of a landmark designation report would divert staff from more immediate priorities. There are other more appropriate venues through which the community can seek to influence the future of this park.

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