



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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July 2, 2024

To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Charles Sullivan
Re: Landmark Evaluation: Foundation for Civic Leadership (Nathaniel Stickney house), 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street (1846)

A citizens' petition with forty signatures was received on May 17, 2024, requesting that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate a landmark designation study of the building at 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street. The Cambridge Election Commission has verified that at thirty-five of the signatories are registered Cambridge voters. The owner, the Foundation for Civic Leadership, was notified and a public hearing was scheduled for July 11, 2024.



43-45 Mt. Auburn Street

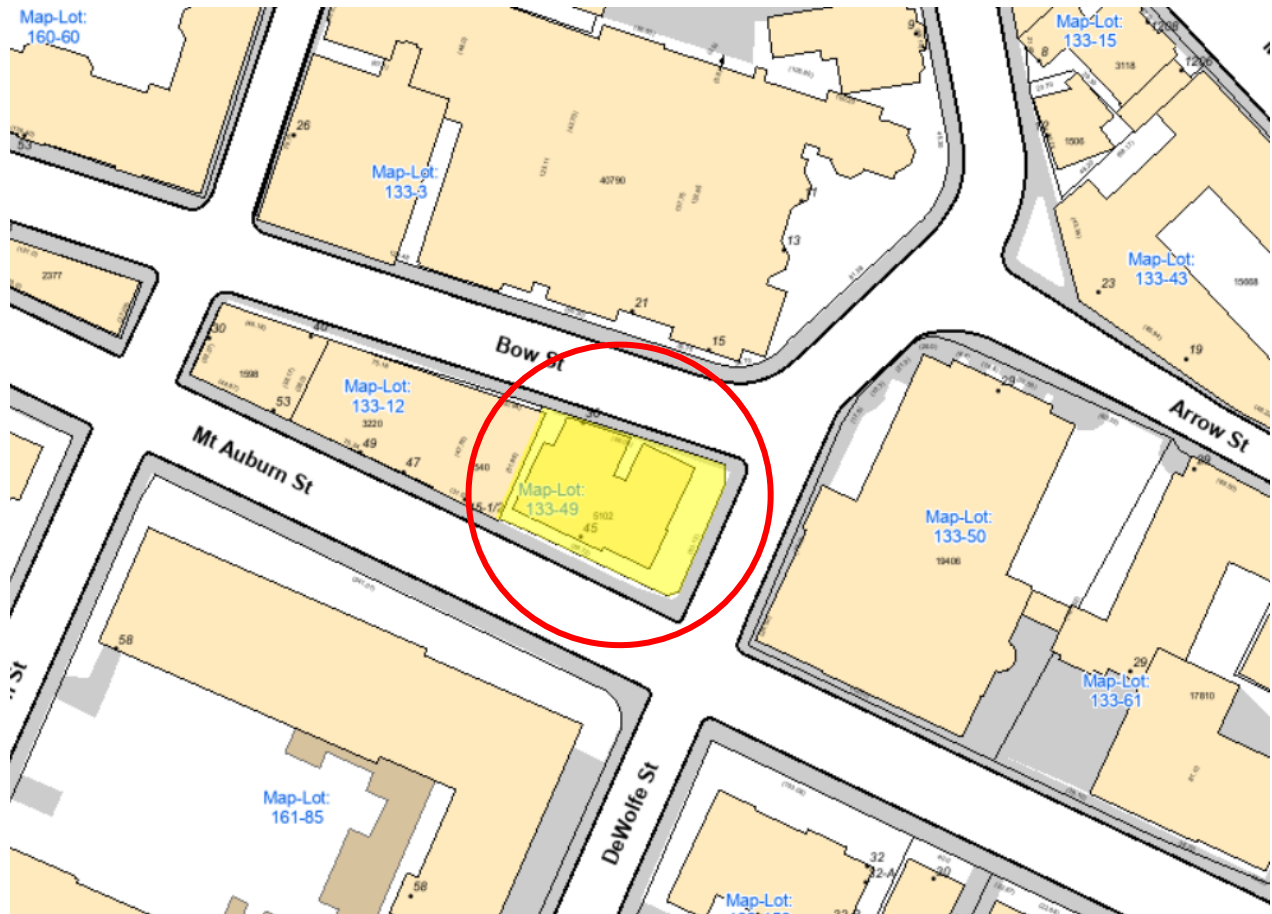
CHC photo, 2017

Description

The Nathaniel Stickney house at 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street is a 2½-story, Greek Revival style building built as a double house in 1846 with a club room addition constructed in 1928. The six-bay, center-entrance façade and gable roof face Mt. Auburn Street, while a one-story ell extends back to Bow Street. The exterior is clad with clapboards and the original exterior trim is largely intact. The 6+6 window sash, protected by aluminum storm windows, appear to be original, while the Neoclassical pedimented front door surround probably dates from renovations in 1928. The roof is covered with asphalt shingles. The foundation is brick above ledgestone. The house originally had a generous side yard at the corner of DeWolf Street, but much of this was taken up with

a one-story brick addition constructed by the Speakers Club in 1928. The Assessors rate the overall condition of the building as “excellent.” Although converted to an undergraduate club in 1928, the building still presents as a modest vernacular residence.

The lot at 43-45 Mt. Auburn contains 5,102 square feet and is bounded by DeWolfe Street on the east and Bow Street on the north. According to the assessors the building has a total living area of 7,619 sf and contains three units, the nature of which is unclear. The assessed value of the building is \$2,539,900, and the overall value of the property is \$5,045,200. The owner, The Foundation for Civic Leadership, has owned the building since 2002 (35980/002).



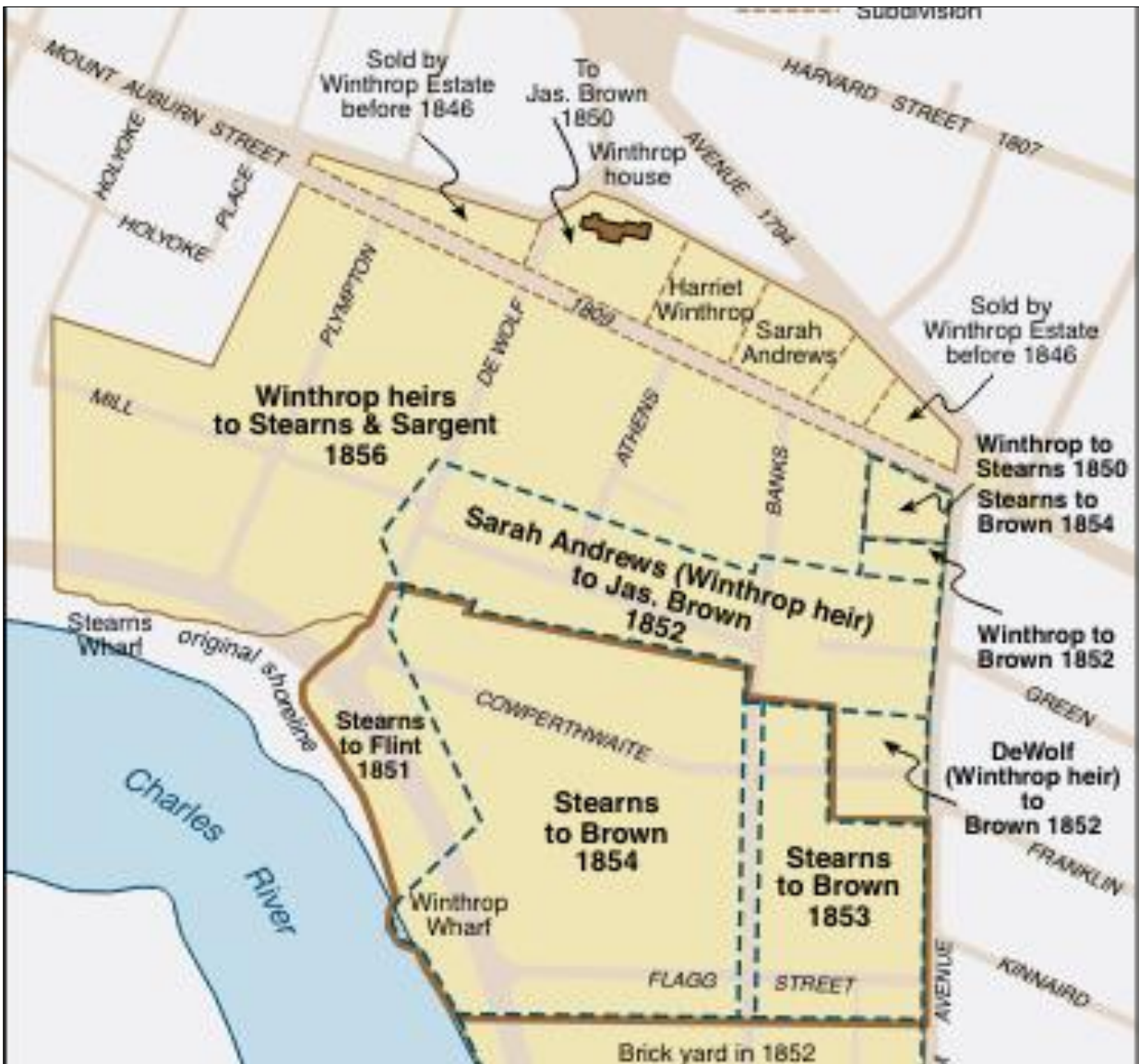
43-45 Mt. Auburn Street.

Cambridge GIS, Assessor's map

History

The Nathaniel Stickney house was built in 1846 on the northwest corner of a 46-acre Colonial-era estate inherited by Middlesex County Sheriff David Phips. Phips's property, which was comparable to the Tory estates west of the village, was acquired after the Revolution by William Winthrop (1753–1825), one of the few men of business in the town. There were about 8½ acres of salt marsh between Holyoke and DeWolfe streets, and below that the river bank was relatively firm. The 35 acres of upland included 20 acres of “English mowing” (hayfields) and four acres in cultivation. The rest was pasture, which supported six cows Winthrop kept to supply milk to the college. The Phips mansion may not have been habitable, because in 1818 Winthrop built a new house on the old foundation that overlooked the wharf where his schooners landed cargos of firewood and building materials.

Winthrop died childless in 1825, leaving his estate in trust for the five children of his brother, John; the property was to be divided among them after twenty-one years. Winthrop's farm remained intact until 1843, when the trustee of his estate sold off the extremities of the long, narrow block between Mt. Auburn and Arrow streets. Housepainters and glaziers Joshua and James Thayer bought a lot near the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Mt. Auburn Street; their 1844 house at 11 Mt. Auburn is the oldest still standing on the farm. Lumber dealer Nathaniel Stickney bought a lot just west of the Winthrop House and put up 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street in 1846.



Disposition of the Winthrop farm, 1844-1856

Nathaniel Newton Stickney (1816-1897) was born in Bridgeton, Maine and came to Cambridge as a young journeyman carpenter, marrying a year after he built 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street as his own residence. In the 1860s he entered into a partnership with Royal Gilkey, a lumber dealer in Watertown, but by about 1870 he had leased Winthrop's Wharf and established his own lumber business there. Lumber was delivered by schooner from Southern and Down Eastern points, feeding the construction boom that transformed Old Cambridge after the Civil War.



N. N. Stickney house in 1873, before the extension of DeWolf Street

N. N. STICKNEY & CO.
DEALERS IN
Rough and Dressed Lumber,
LIME, CEMENT, HAIR, AND PLASTER.
 Also Gutters, Conductors, Mouldings, Laths, Shingles, Pickets, C. Posts, etc.
WINTHROP WHARF,
DE WOLF STREET, - - - OLD CAMBRIDGE.
N. N. STICKNEY. WILLIAM E. SAUNDERS.

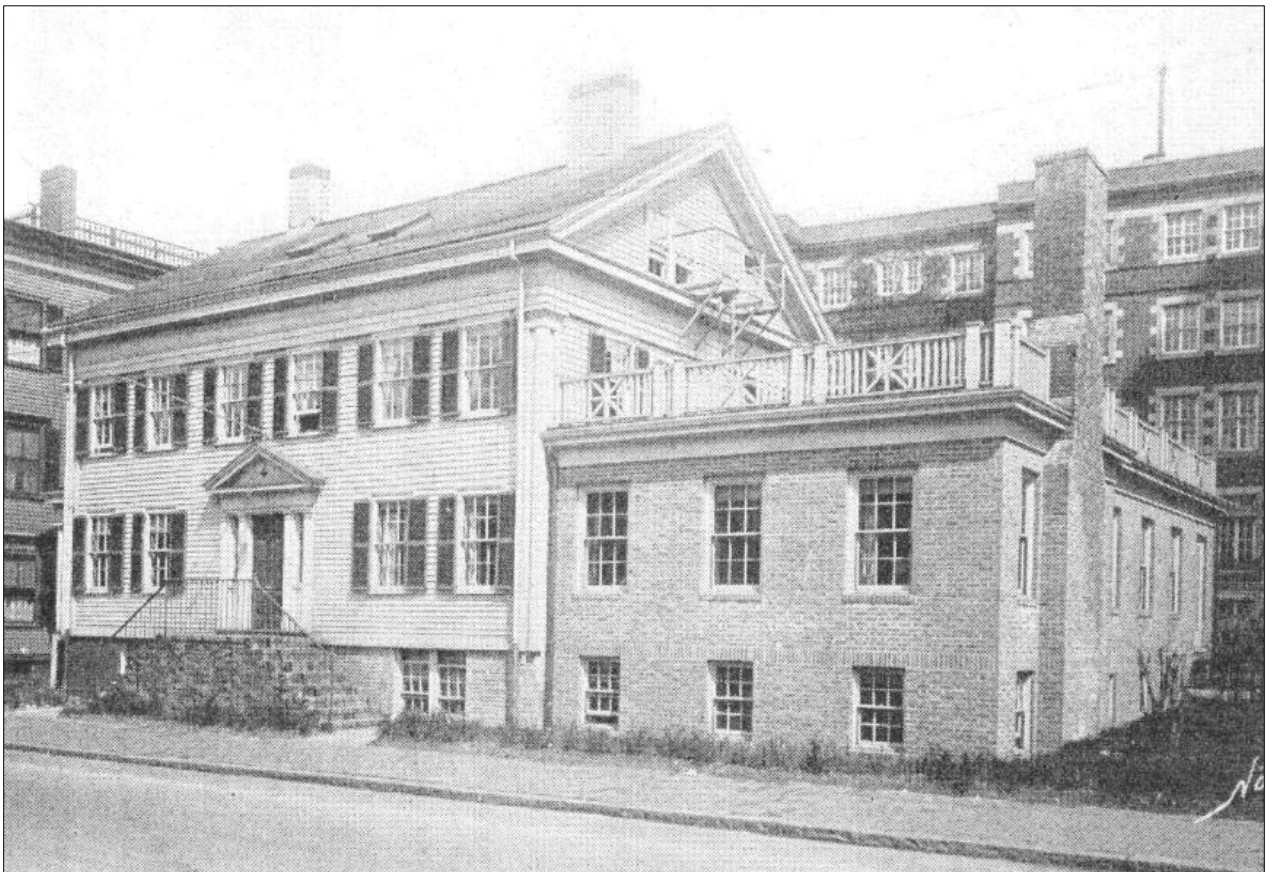
Advertisement for Nathaniel Stickney's lumber yard on Winthrop's Wharf, at the foot of DeWolfe Street (1874).



The industrial waterfront of Old Cambridge, looking downstream from the chimney of the Boston Elevated Railway power plant in 1897. A schooner is unloading bulk cargo at Sargent's Wharf. Winthrop's Wharf and Stickney's lumber sheds are just downstream, next to Harvard's boathouses

Beginning about 1895 the Cambridge Park Commission improved the riverbank and constructed Memorial Drive. After Stickney's death in 1897 the property was acquired by the University Associates, a group of Harvard alumni who were secretly buying properties between Mt. Auburn Street and the river on behalf of Harvard University. Dozens of houses were razed to create the River Houses, but Harvard apparently had no interest in the Stickney house property and the University Associates sold it in 1926. By this time the location could have been considered an extension of the Gold Coast of Harvard student clubs and once-private dormitories. A Roxbury property developer intended to clear the site and erect a three-story building, but died before he could do so. The mortgage holder recovered the property and sold it to the Speakers Club, an undergraduate club that was one of about 28 such organizations that renovated or built clubhouses in Harvard Square between 1887 and 1956.

The Speakers Club appears to have been organized about 1909, and until 1915 occupied the former home of Louis Agassiz on Quincy Street where the Fogg Museum now stands. They first moved to Holyoke Street, but when Harvard purchased that property, the club acquired 45 Mt. Auburn Street. The club retained architect Harry J. Carlson (1869-1957) to convert the Stickney house. Carlson, a partner in the firm of Coolidge & Carlson, was not a Harvard graduate but had designed several distinguished buildings for the university community. An 1892 graduate of MIT, he had also worked for Cram & Ferguson and McKim, Mead & White. Carlson combined the two sides of Stickney's double house and added a one-story brick club room, which may have been intended as the base of a taller structure. The structure remains unchanged except for the removal of a balustrade.



Speakers Club, 43_45 Mt. Auburn Street, 1935

The Speakers Club eventually merged with the Pi Eta Club but became involved in so many scandals that its graduate board was forced to close the facility in 1990. The club maintained ownership of the property, however, and after a failed merger with the Sigma Chi club finally sold it to the Foundation for Civic Leadership in 2002.

The Foundation for Civic Leadership (FCL), founded by Harvard graduate Ian Simmons, accommodated a variety of activist organizations that made their home there, including such groups as Art Without Borders, Avaaz, Boston Mobilization, The Foundation for Civic Leadership, Sustainable Endowments, The Pacific Forest Trust and The Catholic Democrats. In 2009 these groups protested a proposed sale of the building, but the deal fell through when Harvard's Undergraduate Council could not raise the \$4 million sale price or the \$400,000 estimated cost of renovations.

In April 2024 FCL announced a new plan to close what is now known as The Democracy Center on July 1 for renovations. Activist groups and community organizers who have been users of the space, claiming an existential threat, have protested the closing and secured a remonstrance from the Cambridge City Council.

Significance

The N.N. Stickney house is a contributing building in the Harvard Square National Register District. It is a rare survivor of the earliest period of development on the Phips-Winthrop estate, and gains significance through its later conversion to an undergraduate club by distinguished architect Harry N. Carlson.



43-45 Mt. Auburn Street

Cambridge Assessors photo



Rear elevation, 43-45 Mt. Auburn Street

Google Street View, 2020

Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission may commence a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of thirty registered voters. The Superior Court has found that the Commission can use its discretion to decline petitions which it determines are unnecessary or duplicative.¹

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; to improve the quality of its built environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, areas, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic, racial, or social history of the City; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas or structures; to welcome a diverse set of residents and broaden appreciation for individuals with marginalized identities who have shaped Cambridge's history; and by furthering these purposes in balance with other City priorities such as affordable housing construction, environmental sustainability, and accessibility to promote the public welfare by making the City a more attractive, desirable, affordable, diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive place in which to live and work (2.78.140).

¹ *Gladys P. Gifford and Others vs. Cambridge Historical Commission*, Middlesex Superior Court Civil Action No. 17-00372.

The procedure for initiating a landmark designation study is outlined in Section 2.78.180.D of the City Code:

Any thirty registered voters of the City may petition that the Historical Commission initiate, or the Historical Commission on its own may initiate, the process of designating a landmark or amending or rescinding any such designation theretofore made. ... The Commission shall within sixty days following the filing of such request or petition hold a preliminary hearing If a petition for a landmark designation is not accepted by the Historical Commission ... the Historical Commission shall not reconsider a proposed designation, amendment or rescission of designation within two years of its previous hearing thereon.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible landmark 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)

Relationship to Criteria

The Stickney house meets criterion (1) for its associations with the economic and social history of Cambridge, and criterion (2) as “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.”

Staff Recommendations

The Stickney house is already protected by the Harvard Square Neighborhood Conservation District, which was adopted in 2000 under the same city ordinance that enables designation of landmarks. Designation as a landmark would not add any further regulatory protections.

The current owners have announced plans to close the buildings for renovation. Any publicly visible exterior alterations would fall under the jurisdiction of the Historical Commission under the terms of the Harvard Square Conservation District. Acceptance of the petition and initiation of a landmark study would not change the nature of that review.

While petitioners are concerned about the owner’s intentions regarding the occupancy of the building, the Commission’s jurisdiction is limited to publicly visible features; interior arrangements, use, or landlord-tenant arrangements cannot be considered.

The staff recommends that the Commission decline to accept the petition for the reasons stated.