

FINAL LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

Charles Hicks Saunders House

1627 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass.



The Charles Hicks Saunders house at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue, constructed in 1862, is one of Cambridge's most important examples of Second Empire domestic architecture. It is also significant for its association with Charles Saunders, Mayor of Cambridge in 1868-69. The property was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1964 and individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

The Historical Commission initiated a designation study of the Saunders house in October 2021 in response to reports that owner Lesley University intended to sell the property on the open market. The 14,400 square foot lot meant redevelopment proposals were inevitable, and the Commission acted quickly to ensure preservation of the house and appropriate design for new construction. On March 30, 2023, the Historical Commission voted unanimously to approve in principle an affordable housing project proposed by the current owner, Homeowners Rehab, Inc., and to recommend that the City Council designate the property as a Cambridge Landmark.

Designation of the property by the City Council as a Cambridge Landmark will protect and conserve the entire premises and ensure that the proposed conversion to affordable housing can proceed as planned.

Charles Sullivan and Sarah Burks
Cambridge Historical Commission
May 3, 2023

Introduction

The Charles Hicks Saunders house at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue was constructed by a merchant and future mayor of Cambridge in 1862-63. It was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1964 and individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 as an important example of the Second Empire style and because of its associations with the Saunders family.

Preservation of the remaining North Avenue mansions has been a priority of the Cambridge Historical Commission since the late 1970s, when the demolition of the first Nathaniel Sawin house and The Greycroft at the corner of Chauncy Street caused the City Council to adopt the first demolition delay ordinance in Massachusetts. The generous zoning and large size of the lot places the Saunders house at risk, although the same factors would also make possible the accommodation of new housing in an addition or in a separate building.

Lesley University announced the pending sale of the Saunders house along with seven nearby houses on Mellen Street in September 2021. At the October 7, 2021 hearing of the Historical Commission the Executive Director advised that the Saunders property was particularly vulnerable to redevelopment because of its large size and favorable C-2A zoning. The existing house took up only about half the lot, while the remainder was a parking lot. Initiation of a landmark designation study might discourage redevelopment of the entire site and preserve it for sympathetic reuse, such as for an affordable housing project similar to Frost Terrace at 1789-1791 Massachusetts Avenue. The Commission voted to initiate a landmark designation study, but since no public notice had been given the staff scheduled a public hearing for a subsequent meeting so the owner and the public could receive adequate notice.

On November 10, 2021, the Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation study. Lesley University, which was still the owner, did not object and the Commission voted unanimously to confirm the October 7 vote that initiated the study. The effect of the Commission's vote was to protect the building from inappropriate alterations for up to one year, or until October 6, 2022, while the Commission formulated a recommendation to the City Council.

In early November 2021, a representative of Homeowners Rehab, Inc., a non-profit affordable housing agency, informed CHC staff that HRI was exploring the possibility of acquiring the property. CHC staff responded that the Commission had acknowledged the suitability of the site for affordable housing construction, as long as the house was protected. HRI closed on the property at the end of March 2022, and began design development discussions with Icon Architecture and CHC staff.

Commission staff advised HRI that a schematic design for new construction and renovation of the house could be incorporated into the Commission's landmark designation report, giving assurance to HRI and other city boards that development for affordable housing could proceed. HRI agreed with this approach but needed more time for community consultation and design development. With HRI's consent to CHC's continued jurisdiction, on September 8, 2022 the Commission voted to extend the study period for an additional nine months, or until May 8, 2023.

In January and February 2023 CHC and Community Development Department staff engaged with HRI and their architects in an informal design review exercise. In the meantime, HRI engaged the public, most recently on March 15, 2023. CHC staff agreed that the proposed design was well-

developed and recommended that HRI apply for a conditional Certificate of Appropriateness for consideration at the landmark designation hearing scheduled for March 30, 2023.

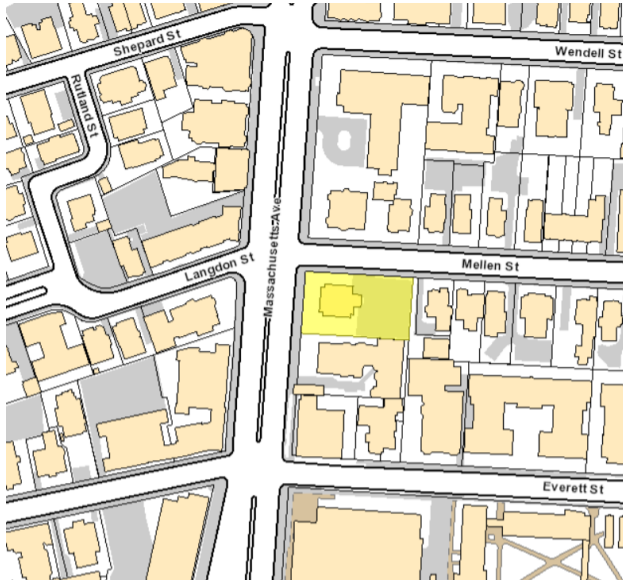
On March 30, the Historical Commission reviewed the Preliminary Landmark Designation Report as well as HRI's application for a Certificate of Appropriateness for construction of affordable housing and renovation of the house, as described on pp. 16-20 of this report.

The Commission voted unanimously to approve the new construction and renovation in principle, with the understanding that the design would undergo further evolution in consultation with other boards and that HRI would return for final approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness. With no objection from the owner, the Commission also voted unanimously to approve the Preliminary Report and to recommend that the City Council designate the Saunders property as a Cambridge Landmark.



1627 Massachusetts Avenue. CHC photo, 2009.

I. Location and Zoning Considerations



Cambridge Assessors



NearMap.com, 2021

The property at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue consists of a 14,400 square foot lot on the south corner of Mellen Street (Assessors map 157/1) with an assessed value of \$3.4 million. The lot has 90' of frontage on the avenue and 160' on Mellen Street. The zoning is C-2A, a multi-family residential district with a height limit of 60' and an FAR of 2.5. At an allowed maximum of 145 dwelling units per acre, the lot could theoretically accommodate 48 units. Slightly more than half of the lot is currently paved and used for parking. Preservation of the Saunders house as a landmark would not preclude appropriate development of the parking lot for housing, either in a separate building or as an addition to the house, as recently seen at 1791 Massachusetts Avenue. The sale of 7, 9, 11, 13 and 17-21 Mellen Street, all of which are regarded as significant, threatens the context of the Saunders house, but these can be protected through demolition delay if necessary.

As described below, the Saunders house served as a rooming house or dormitory from 1926 until Lesley University acquired it in 1976. At first Lesley used the house for graduate school offices, but after about 1986 it served as the admissions office. The removal of kitchens and bathrooms associated with its conversion to office use restored the original configuration of the rooms. Lesley University sold the property to Homeowners Rehab, Inc. in 2022. The house is currently vacant.

II. Area Description

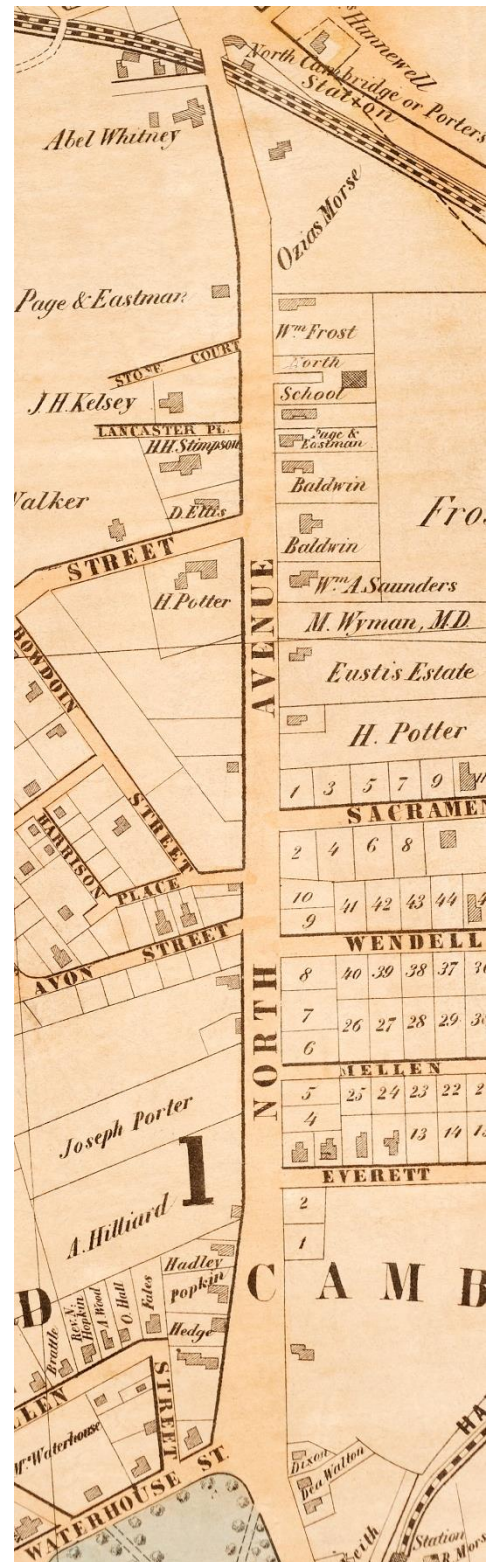
The urban context of the Saunders house was described in *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development*, by Susan Maycock and Charles Sullivan (MIT Press, 2016).

Massachusetts Avenue above Cambridge Common was laid out in the early 17th century as the “Highway to Menotomy.” The road went along the Lower Common, passed the gallows, swung westward around the foot of Avon Hill, and crossed Poverty Plain on its way to Concord, which was settled in 1635. ... After 1841 it was called North Avenue. In 1894 when the Harvard Bridge was completed, all the old streets that made up the new cross-town thoroughfare were renamed Massachusetts Avenue.

The great width of the right-of-way, 33 yards (99 feet), had its roots in early English practice and allowed the traveler to pick the path of least resistance across the ungraded terrain. ... For two centuries it was used mainly by residents of outlying towns to bring their produce to market or to reach the county seat, but when the Charlestown Branch Railroad opened a station at Porter Square in 1842 Boston was suddenly only twenty minutes away. North Avenue became the city’s most desirable address for commuting businessmen, but in the 20th century apartments and stores displaced almost all their monumental Mansard, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival houses. The avenue now displays little of the character that made it desirable in earlier times.

In the 17th century there were several farmhouses on the east side of the highway, but the common land opposite was not settled for many years after it was distributed in 1724. ... By the 1840s there were only remnants of the agricultural period: ancient houses, barns in “tumble down condition,” stone walls, old foundations, remnants of tanneries, and “ten-footers,” the one-room shacks of the poorest families. ...

The first significant development in the 19th century began on the west side of the avenue near the Common, where Oliver Hastings built three houses in 1831–33 The Greek Revival was in



North Avenue in 1854

vogue when railroad service began in 1842, and the first suburban houses near Porter's Station were in this style; one survives at 2A Forest Street. William A. Saunders (1818–1899), the oldest son of William Saunders, the housewright, built a flashy Greek Revival opposite Linnaean Street in 1843. ... The Saunders house was moved to 6 Prentiss Street in 1925 and became a bed-and-breakfast, the Mary Prentiss Inn.

When the horsecar line opened in 1856 there were still only about twenty-five houses along the avenue, clustered in the first block north of Waterhouse Street and at the north end near the station. ... Michael Norton, a masonry contractor, built an elaborate Mansard in 1861 that established this as the preferred style for decades to come.



Massachusetts Avenue looking north from the Little Common about 1875. From the left are John Worcester's house at 1600 (1865; demolished 1979), the Michael Norton house (with a cupola) at 1610 (1860; demolished 1925), and the Nathaniel Sawin house at 1626 (1868). Harvard University Archives.

Nathaniel Sawin, a produce dealer in Boston, built a handsome Mansard on the south corner of Chauncy Street in 1865, replacing a gambrel built by John Wyeth about 1724. Three years later he sold it to marketman John E. Worcester and built a new house at 1626 Massachusetts Avenue that was designated a Cambridge landmark in 1981. James Huntington's ca. 1869 Mansard at 1640 Massachusetts Avenue survives behind a block of stores erected in 1923 [see photo below]. In 1862 Charles Hicks Saunders, a Boston hardware merchant and another son of the well-known housewright, began a spacious house on the corner of Mellen Street that exemplified the continuing fashion for ambitious Second Empire mansions. Mansards built in 1864 by Abijah Hildreth, the president of the Cambridge Gas Company, and in 1869 by William Wentworth, a marble manufacturer in Boston, disappeared in the mid-20th century.

North Avenue reached its zenith just as it was renamed Massachusetts Avenue in 1894. Some of the finest homes in the city lined the broad sidewalks, but the great breadth of the street made it irresistible as a traffic artery. Harvard Square was a major transfer point for street railway passengers, and North Avenue was the most direct route to the emerging suburbs beyond Porter Square. Brattle Street residents were able to force the West End Street Railway to take up its tracks and build on other streets, but North Avenue people could not prevent the introduction of noisy electric streetcars in 1889. The completion of the Cambridge Subway in 1912 sparked a boom in apartment houses, which brought retail stores in their wake. Proliferating trucks and automobiles created traffic conditions

incompatible with a residential neighborhood. In the span of two decades Massachusetts Avenue north of Shepard Street was transformed into a seedy commercial strip.

The change began in 1898, when Canadian-born businessman William G. MacLeod built the city's first luxury apartment houses, the Montrose and the Dunvegan, on an empty lot at the corner of Shepard Street. Subsequent buildings invariably displaced single-family houses.



The Montrose and The Dunvegan, 1648 and 1654 Mass. Ave. (1898). CHC collections.

The next to go up was Benlumay Court (1909), a Mission-style structure with 21 apartments near the corner of Everett Street. Across the street, the Georgian Revival Bay State (1915), a 38-unit building, resembled the private dormitories of the Gold Coast. Gradually the buildings became larger, as at Linnaean Hall (1914, 36 units), the Newport Apartments (1916, 80 units), the Lancaster (1924, 56 units), Chauncy Hall (1925, 80 units), and Oxford Court (1926, 101 units). In 1925 the *Chronicle* noted “the passing of many fine residences,” and described ten that had been lost recently (Aug. 8).

Stores first appeared on the avenue in 1910, when Dr. George True, who gave up dentistry for real estate, planned to build some on the corner of Sacramento Street. The *Chronicle* anticipated the commotion: “These stores will be the first ones to be located between Porter’s station and Harvard square and while there is an unquestionable demand for them, their presence will not be relished by those who desire to keep the neighborhood a residential one exclusively” (Apr. 2, 1910). Neighbors successfully appealed to the Supreme Judicial Court to enforce the 20-foot setback and residential restrictions in the subdivision deed of 1853, and Dr. True built the apartment houses at 1675-79 Massachusetts Avenue instead.

While the court was upholding residential use on the east side of Massachusetts Avenue, Somerville druggist Adam McColgan was breaking ground for stores on the corner of Hudson Street, where there were no restrictions. Only one other retail block – 1607-1615 Massachusetts Avenue, at the corner of Everett Street – was erected before World War I, but commercial construction overwhelmed the avenue in the 1920s. In 1926, the *Chronicle* counted 106 stores between Everett Street and the railroad bridge. ...

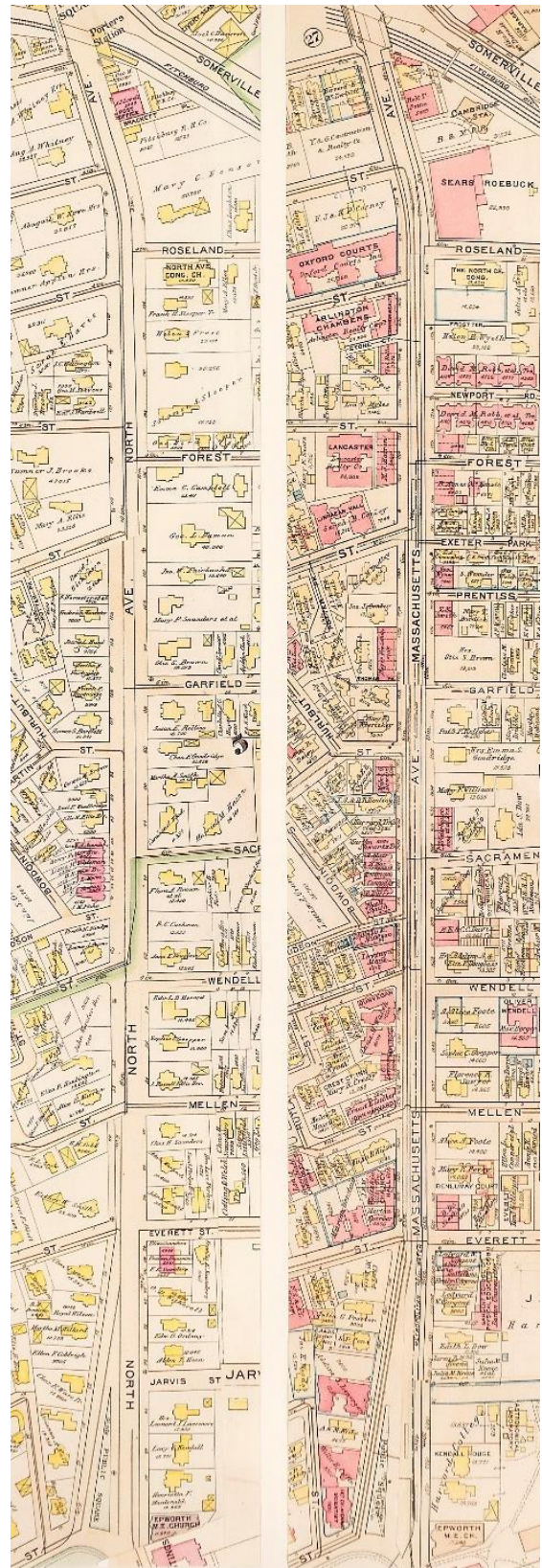
The zoning map drawn by the Planning Board in 1922 placed the entire avenue in a residential district. When enacted two years later, the ordinance included a business district from Shepard and Wendell streets to Porter Square and allowed 100-foot-high buildings

everywhere. The depth of this high-density corridor was quite narrow, however, and apart from the Sears, Roebuck store built in 1928 only projects that could obtain variances to build in the adjoining 40-foot districts went up before the code was rewritten in 1962.

After 1958 the Massachusetts Department of Public Works began to rebuild the avenue from Harvard Square to the Arlington line. A concrete median replaced the streetcar tracks and safety islands, and every tree was removed as the sidewalks were narrowed from 17 feet to 11. Traffic flow improved at the expense of public transportation and pedestrian amenities.

Developers returned in 1960, when a 137-room Holiday Inn replaced two Mansards between Mellen and Wendell streets. In 1968 Harvard took down two houses south of Jarvis Street to build Roscoe Pound Hall and put up a garage on the corner of Everett Street in place of buildings once occupied by the Sargent School of Physical Education. Despite considerable opposition, The Greycroft and the Nathaniel Sawin house were replaced with condominiums in 1979–80. Two years later, the consequent enactment of preservation ordinances helped prevent the Park Street Church from razing the Sawin house on the corner of Langdon Street.

In 2007 the Harvard Law School began a long-anticipated redevelopment of the north-west corner of its campus. Wasserstein Hall might have swept away the last houses on this part of the avenue, but Harvard created a perfect site for them on the former Holiday Inn parking lot [across Mellen Street from the Charles Hicks Saunders house].



Massachusetts Avenue in 1894 and 1930.
G.W. Bromley Atlases of Cambridge.



The former Holiday Inn (1960) and the Alden Keen (1876) and the D. Gilbert Dexter houses (1875) at their new location on the corner of Mellen Street opposite the Charles Hicks Saunders house. CHC photo, 2009

Today the Charles Hicks Saunders house is at the center of the most significant remaining group of North Avenue mansions. Across the avenue, the Nathaniel Sawin house at 1626 Massachusetts Avenue on the corner of Langdon Street was designated a Cambridge Landmark in 1981. In 2007 the Harvard Law School relocated the Alden Keen (1876) and the D. Gilbert Dexter houses (1875) to the corner of Mellen Street, which had previously been occupied by the parking lot of the former Holiday Inn. To the east, Mellen Street displays a number of late 19th-century houses that have been preserved in near-original condition by Lesley University.

III. Architectural Description



Charles Hicks Saunders house, 1627 Massachusetts Avenue. Historic American Buildings Survey, 1964

The Charles Hicks Saunders house was described in *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* (pp. 510-511):

One of the finest surviving examples of [the Second Empire] type is 1627 Massachusetts Avenue, now owned by Lesley University. Built for Charles Hicks Saunders, a Boston hardware merchant elected mayor of Cambridge in 1868, this house set a new standard for ambitious Mansard mansions on the avenue.

Joseph H. Littlefield (1830–1904), a Maine native, was listed as a builder in Cambridge directories from 1850 to 1864 and as an architect in Boston from 1872 to 1876. His most important commission in Cambridge was the 1874 City Building in Brattle Square. The house he built for Saunders followed the familiar three-bay center entrance plan with an unusual level of decorative detail for the early 1860s, including at least five patterns of complex brackets and dentils. A three-bay porch with chamfered posts and segmental arched struts led to double entrance doors with decorative cut and etched glass panels. Because of the prominent corner site, ornament continued on the side elevations with bay windows and dormers with elaborate scrollwork. The interior was richly appointed with a gracefully curving staircase and eight-sided newel, wide plaster cornices and ceiling medallions, white marble parlor mantels, and a parquet floor. The excellent 19th-century cast iron fence with granite posts and base is a rare survivor.



South elevation, from the southeast. Historic American Building Survey photo, 1964.



Detail of bay window. HABS photo, 1964.



Detail of cornice and dormers. HABS photo, 1964.



Cast iron fence and gate at Massachusetts Avenue. HABS photo, 1964.



Cast iron fence at Massachusetts Avenue. HABS photo, 1964.



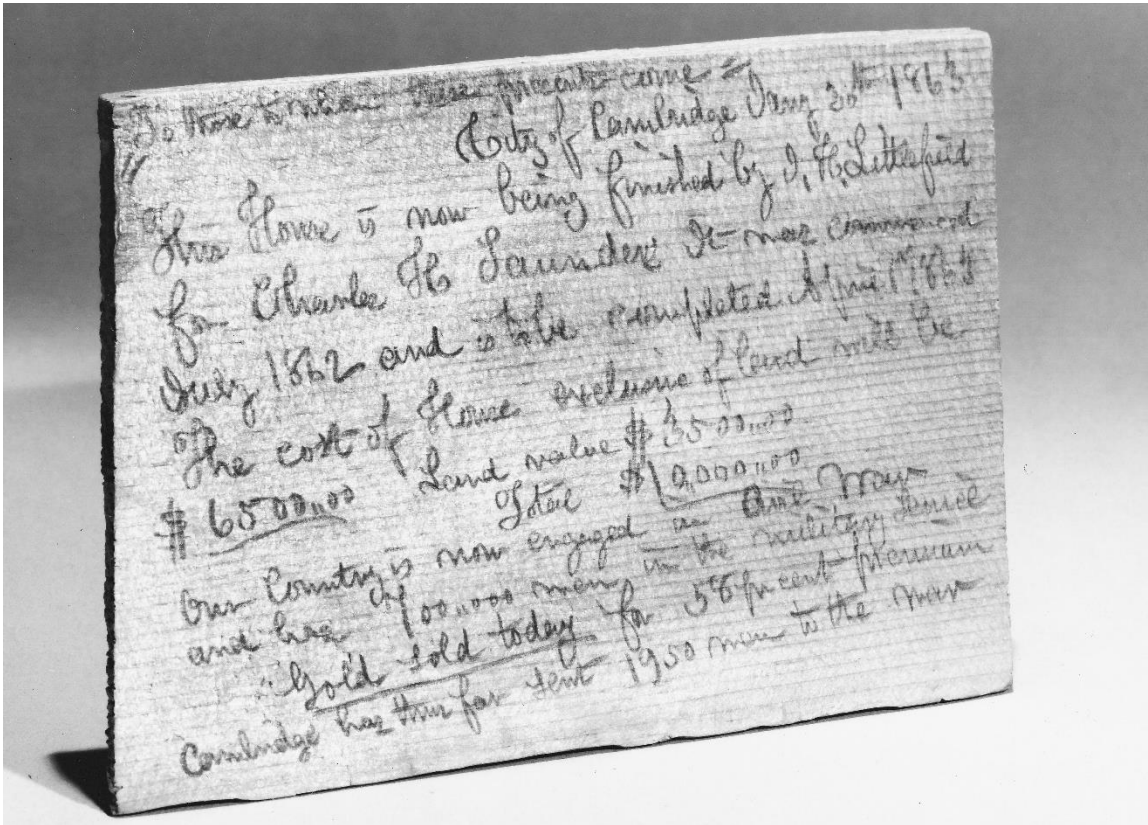
Entry hall and staircase. HABS photo, 1964



South parlor, detail of fireplace wall. HABS photo, 1964.

One significant historical feature of the house was an inscription found during renovations in the mid-1970s. One of the builders or perhaps Saunders himself had penciled an unusual record of its history on a shingle found inside a door jamb:

This House is now being finished by J.H. Littlefield for Charles H. Saunders. It was commenced July 1862 and is to be completed April 1 1863. The cost of the House exclusive of the land will be \$6500.00, Land value \$3500.00, Total \$10,000. Our country is now engaged in Civil War and has 700,000 men in the military service. ... Cambridge has thus far sent 1950 men to the war. Jan. 20, 1863.



Inscribed shingle dated January 20, 1863, found in a door jamb during renovations ca. 1976. Present location unknown.

IV. History and Significance

Master housewright William Saunders (1787–1861) was one of the most prominent builders of his day. He established a family dynasty that dominated politics and real estate development in Old Cambridge from the 1830s through the 1870s. Saunders arrived in Cambridge from Quincy in 1801 at age 14 or 15 and soon became known as a creative practitioner of the Federal and Greek Revival styles. Among his early works were his own 1821 house at 0 Garden Street, which is the present Christ Church rectory, and the Greek Revival house next door that he built for Sarah Howe in 1838. Saunders was a selectman under town government and then an alderman after the establishment of city government in 1846. All five of Saunders' sons established themselves as merchants in Boston and Cambridge; three served as elected officials, and two built impressive houses on Massachusetts Avenue.

William Saunders' sons were William Augustus (1818-1899), a builder and Alderman, Charles Hicks (1821-1901), a hardware merchant in Boston and Mayor of Cambridge in 1868-69, George Savil (1823-1909), a merchant and President of the Common Council, Francis (1826-1911), a merchant in Harvard Square, and Horace (1830-1902), a dealer in real estate. A daughter, Sarah Ann, died in 1893. The sons were also builders and speculators in real estate, working together or individually throughout Old Cambridge. William A. Saunders, an antiquarian in his spare time, was responsible for almost the entire development of Frost, Forest, and upper Oxford streets, and is credited with over 45 houses there. Horace mostly worked on the west side of North Avenue, with over 35 houses to his credit between 1835 and 1875. Charles, who was probably preoccupied with his business in Boston, built 14 houses on Avon, Follen, Mellen, and Shepard streets between 1844 and 1882.

Charles Hicks Saunders prepared for college at Cambridge's Hopkins Classical School, but instead worked for a bank in Boston before entering the hardware business. He continued in this work until he retired in 1863 at age 42, after which he engaged in real estate development and local politics. He served on the Common Council in 1853-54 and on the Common Council in 1861-62. He was an Assessor in 1864-67, and was elected mayor in 1868 and 1869, running unopposed with the support of four political parties.

Among Saunders' accomplishments as mayor were the requirement that police officers wear uniforms and the construction of a fire alarm telegraph system. He directed the beautification of what is now Sennott Park and the construction of brick sidewalks from Harvard Square to Boston. One of his final acts was to lay the cornerstone of the Soldiers Monument on Cambridge Common. Later in life Saunders served as chair of the city's investment commission, a trustee of the Cambridge Savings Bank, a director of the Cambridge Gas-Light Company, and a member of several historical and fraternal organizations. He is also said to have written the inscriptions on the granite historical tablets erected by the city.



1627 Massachusetts Avenue in the rooming house era. Dan Reiff photo, 1969

After Saunders' death in 1901, 1627 Massachusetts Avenue passed to his wife, Mary Brooks Saunders, a Concord Academy graduate, one of whose instructors had been Henry David Thoreau. Mrs. Saunders died in 1919, and in 1926 her daughter Caroline sold the property to Edwin Foote, who with his wife Alice, boarded students from the Sargent School of Physical Education in their home at 1653 Massachusetts Avenue. The Footes invested \$2,500 in improvements and opened 1627 Massachusetts Avenue as a private dormitory in 1927. This arrangement probably ended in 1931 when the Sargent School opened its own dormitory nearby, and the property continued as a rooming house under several subsequent owners. The Weston School of Theology occupied the building from 1972-74, and probably until Lesley purchased it in 1976.

V. Relationship of Property to Criteria

The purpose of landmark designation is described in Ch. 2.78.140 of the City Code, which was enacted in 1983:

... 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.

The enabling ordinance states:

The Historical Commission by majority vote may recommend for designation as a landmark 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 its 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 ... (Chapter 2.78.180.A)

The Charles Hicks Saunders House meets criterion (1) for its associations with the architectural, aesthetic and economic 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)."

VI. Proposed Standards and Guidelines for Review of Alterations and Additions

Under the neighborhood conservation district and landmark designation ordinance, Ch. 2.78, Art. III, the Historical Commission is charged with reviewing all construction, demolition or alterations that affects the exterior architectural features (other than color) of a designated landmark. This section of the report describes exterior architectural features that are among the characteristics that led to consideration of the property as a landmark. Except as the Order designating or amending the landmark may otherwise provide, the exterior architectural features described in this report should be preserved and/or enhanced in any proposed alteration or construction that affects those features of the landmark.

The Standards described below represent current best practices in historic preservation and are generally applicable to any designated property. The following Guidelines are to be consulted during consideration of applications for Certificates of Appropriateness for alterations to the landmark described in this report. The standards and guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive; the Commission must use its collective judgement in determining the appropriateness of any proposed project.

In this context the verb **should** indicates a recommended course of action; the verbs **shall or must** indicates those actions which are specifically required to preserve and protect significant architectural elements.

A. General Standards¹

Subject to review and approval of alterations to exterior architectural features under the terms of this report, the following standards shall apply:

1. The historic character of a property must be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property must be avoided.
2. Changes and additions to the landmark which have taken place over time are evidence of the history of the property and its context. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right and, if so, that significance should be recognized and respected.
3. Significant historic and architectural features of the landmark, including but not limited to those identified in this report, should be preserved if practicable in a manner consistent with these standards.
4. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement, the new feature must match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials.
5. The use of synthetic replacement materials is discouraged, except when substituted for perishable features exposed to the weather or when necessary to accommodate the effects of climate change.²
6. Chemical and/or physical treatments (such as sandblasting) must not be used in a manner that damages historic materials. The surface cleaning of structures must be undertaken using the gentlest means possible and the results should preserve the patina that characterizes the age of the structure. Applications of paint or masonry preservative solutions will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis; painting masonry surfaces will be considered only when there is documentary evidence that this treatment was used at some point in the history of the property.
7. Architectural (building façade) lighting, streetscape lighting, and signage lighting, when allowed by a Certificate of Appropriateness, should reinforce definitive

¹ This section was adopted as a general standard by the Historical Commission on January 6, 2022.

² See *Cambridge Historical Commission Practices in Reviewing Synthetic Trim and Gutters*, June 26, 2018

characteristics of historic and contemporary architecture as well as create high quality 24-hour streetscapes. To achieve these goals, projects should minimize brightness and light trespass, monitor light color (temperature Kelvin), and focus lighting on significant features.

8. Significant archeological resources affected by a project should be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures must be undertaken.

9. Alterations or additions that may be needed to assure the continued use of the historic structure or site or that expand the volume or footprint of the structure should not radically change, obscure or destroy character defining spaces, materials, features or finishes. New additions should be considered only after it has been determined that project requirements cannot be successfully met by altering non-character-defining interior spaces.

10. Additions should reflect an explicit understanding of the architectural character of the historic building and its context. Additions should be designed in a manner that makes clear what is historic and what is new, but should not arbitrarily impose contrasting materials, scales, or design vocabularies. The design of the new work may be contemporary or may reference design motifs from the historic building. Regardless of the design approach, the result should appear as a harmonious whole.

a. Additions should respect the essential form of the historic building and be clearly recessive or subsidiary to the original structure in location, massing, materials, finishes, and textures. Additions are best located at the rear and/or on an inconspicuous side of a historic building and limited in size and scale in relationship to the historic building.

b. Additions should be considered in terms of their effect on the context of the site. Additions can contribute variety and interest in complex urban environments but should not dominate or distract from significant nearby structures.

c. Additions should not compromise the historic aspects, architectural significance, or the distinct character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.

d. Additions should be clearly differentiated from the historic building but still compatible in terms of mass, materials, relationship of solids to voids, and color.

e. Additions should cause the least possible loss of historic materials so that character-defining features are not obscured, damaged, or destroyed.

f. Rooftop additions should be set well back from historic facades so that the historic structure retains its integrity of form and mass. Additional stories, when required for the new use, should be set back from the wall plane and be as inconspicuous as possible when viewed from the street. Designers should be cognizant of distant views and neighborhood context and take advantage of existing parapets to conceal rooftop structures.

g. Additions such as balconies and greenhouses should be placed on non-character-defining elevations and limited in size and scale in relationship to the historic building.

h. Additions should be designed in such a way that if they were to be removed in the future the essential form and integrity of the landmark would be unimpaired.

11. New construction on a designated property shall conform to the guidelines for alterations, where applicable.

12. Demolition of a designated structure can be allowed only as a last resort after all practicable measures have been taken to ensure preservation, or unless required to comply with requirements certified by a duly authorized public officer to be necessary for public safety because of an unsafe or dangerous condition.

B. Guidelines for Review of Alterations at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue

1. Architectural Character

The Charles Hicks Saunders House is a Second Empire structure characterized by a concave Mansard roof interrupted by a split gable and barrel-roofed dormers. There is a copper skylight at the peak of the upper roof. The deeply overhanging cornice is supported by heavy paired brackets and smaller modillions. The three-bay facade features a bay window on the second floor and a one story loggia. Double-hung windows and shutters appear to be mostly original. A two-story ell is distinctly secondary to the overall composition and bears few of the details of the main house. The massing, character, and details of the main house must be respected; the ell may be considered to have much less significance..

2. Site Development.

The current building footprint allows generous and well-landscaped setbacks on the west, south, and north; these must be preserved. Behind the building a 22-car asphalt parking lot covers most of the lot. The east façade and the ell display a functional character very different from the other facades. Subject to zoning constraints and the Certificate of Appropriateness process, new construction on the parking lot could be allowed even if it requires removal of the present ell. The cast iron fence and granite curb on Massachusetts Avenue should be preserved, but the lantern feature added by Lesley University is not significant and may be removed.

2. Alterations

All publicly-visible exterior alterations are subject to the Certificate of Appropriateness process.

a. Exterior surfaces

Original exterior materials on the west, south, and north facades must be preserved insofar as practicable. Repairs should be incremental and executed with materials and surfaces matching the original.

b. Fenestration

Most if not all historic window openings appear to retain their original windows and sash. Original sash should be evaluated for restoration and retrofitted with thermal glazing while maintaining

operability if possible. Replacement windows, if allowed, should replicate historic patterns and details as closely as practicable while achieving energy efficiency goals.

c. Exterior features

Some exterior features, such as the porch skirt boards, post bases, railings and balustrades, are no longer viable. In conformance with past practice, replacement of features exposed to the weather may be made with approved artificial materials. All replacement elements must match the originals in dimensions and appearance.

d. Roof

The concave Mansard is roofed with purple slates that appear to be mostly original. The upper hip roof is also slate. Both upper and lower roofs show multi-colored replacement slates. The dormers are roofed with soldered copper sheets which have patinated to a bright green.

The Mansard portion of the roof should be repaired or replaced with new slates matching the original in color, size, and shape. The dormers, if re-roofed, should be done with bright copper and allowed to weather. The upper roof, which is visible only at a great distance, may be re-roofed with an alternate material. The skylight, if replaced, should match the original in general appearance. Rooftop equipment, if required, should be grouped on the rear slope of the upper roof to minimize visual intrusion. Solar panels, if any, should be mounted close to the upper roof and not less than 18" from the hips, cornice and peak.

e. Accessibility; front porch

The current access ramp will become redundant and may be removed. Porch railings are of recent construction, and if surrounding grades can be altered to bring the height of the porch floor to 30" or less may be removed. The current vestibule enclosing the front door is also of recent construction and may be removed.

f. Interior features

Although interior features are not subject to the jurisdiction of the Historical Commission, the owner should be encouraged to preserve the skylit main staircase and halls up to the third floor and any original window and door trim and mantels. The Civil War-era inscription should be preserved if encountered during the renovation. Allow photographic documentation when significant interior features will be lost.

g. Architectural lighting

Architectural lighting should conform to the general standards for review.

3. Additions

The nature of the Charles Hicks Saunders house site is such that additions can only take place at the back of the site. Evaluation of a proposed addition should consider the architectural character of the building and its immediate surroundings, including the 80' high apartment buildings across Massachusetts Avenue at the corner of Shepard Street and the former Holiday Inn nearby as well as the preserved houses at 1626 and 1637 Massachusetts Avenue and on Mellen Street. The broad public interest in supporting affordable housing should also be taken into account, and the Frost Terrace project considered as a precedent.

VII. Proposed Adaptive Reuse as Affordable Housing

In March 2022 the Saunders property was purchased by Homeowners Rehab, Inc. with the intent of developing affordable housing on the site under the authority of the Affordable Housing Overlay amendment to the Cambridge Zoning Code.

As described on the Community Development Department website,

Adopted by the City Council in October 2020, the 100%-Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) is designed to help affordable housing developers create new, permanently affordable homes more quickly, more cost effectively, and in areas of the city where there are currently fewer affordable housing opportunities. The AHO allows the creation of new, permanently affordable housing that is denser than what might be allowed under base zoning, and creates a new review process through which new affordable housing can be approved more efficiently.

Guidelines for AHO projects published by CDD address site considerations, building design, and sustainability.³ The Planning Board must hold a public design consultation and respond to the developer and Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust regarding AHO projects, but its recommendations are not binding. Currently the Historical Commission has binding review of AHO projects, and on March 30 granted conditional approval of the project as proposed.

CHC and CDD staff have conducted an informal review of the proposed project, which would “repurpose the Saunders House into four affordable rental apartment homes as part of an overall site development that would also add a new construction six story building with twenty-five units to the rear of the Saunders House where there is currently surface parking. This would result in a twenty-nine unit, 100% affordable rental housing development.”



Perspective view from the northwest.

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³ Cambridge Community Development Department, Design Guidelines For Affordable Housing Overlay, 28 July 2020 (https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Housing/Overlay/zngamend_aho_designguide-lines_20200728v2.pdf)



Site plan

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Perspective view from the northeast

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West elevation

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North elevation

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