

area." In the case of new construction, the commission also looks at the size and shape of the construction in relation to its lot and surroundings.

The commission can set stricter standards for development than those allowed by zoning. However, interiors and aspects of the property not visible from a public way cannot be regulated by the commission. The commission also relies on broad standards contained in state and federal guidelines, including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

In addition, each neighborhood conservation district order may incorporate other criteria tailored to the district. These criteria may specify, for example, that the commission consider the impact of alterations on the district as a whole, including the physical characteristics of the site and the streetscape. The order may also direct the commission to avoid increased density. For further information, consult the orders and application forms for each district.

Does being in a neighborhood conservation district mean that I can never change the appearance of my house?

No. Properties in neighborhood conservation districts are not frozen in time. District controls are intended to ensure that a neighborhood's distinctive qualities are taken into consideration when changes occur. Most routine and minor changes are reviewed administratively, by the Historical Commission staff. Many other changes are reviewed by the neighborhood conservation district commission in an advisory, nonbinding capacity. Binding review in a public hearing is generally reserved for major changes, such as demolition, new construction, and major exterior alteration, which would affect neighborhood character.

Neighborhood conservation district commissions work with applicants to develop design solutions that respect both the neighborhood's significant qualities and the needs of the property owner. In addition, the commission staff is always available to discuss proposed alterations informally.

Cambridge Historical Commission

Charles M. Sullivan

Executive Director

Sarah J. Zimmerman

Secretary to the Neighborhood

Conservation District Commissions



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Sarah Colburn House, 7 Dana Street (1841). Photo, 1964 (Jack Boucher, Historic American Buildings Survey).

Ash Street Place. Photo, 1973 (Richard Cheek, Cambridge Historical Commission).

Quincy Street from Broadway. Photo, ca. 1865 (Cambridge Historical Society).

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Published June, 1989

Neighborhood Conservation Districts Cambridge

NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION DISTRICTS IN CAMBRIDGE

Protecting Neighborhood Character

In 1983, the Cambridge City Council adopted legislation designed to preserve and protect areas and buildings significant in Cambridge's history. City Ordinance 1002 allows for the "establishment of neighborhood conservation districts and protected landmarks."

Neighborhood conservation districts are groups of buildings that are architecturally and historically distinctive, whereas designated landmarks are individual buildings or structures whose architecture or history makes them worth preserving. The establishment of such a district recognizes the particular design and architectural qualities of special neighborhoods in Cambridge and encourages their protection and maintenance for the benefit of the entire city.

Establishing Neighborhood Conservation Districts

According to Ordinance 1002, the purpose of establishing a neighborhood conservation district is to

conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City of Cambridge and to improve the quality of its environment through . . . conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods . . . 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; . . . and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the City a more attractive and desirable place in which to live and work.

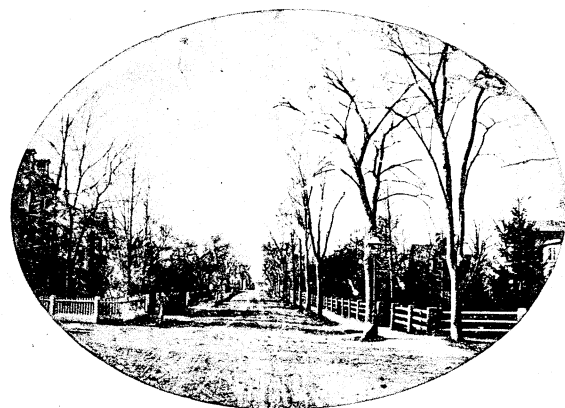
The establishment of a district is initiated when ten registered voters petition the Historical Commission to study an area's potential. The Commission itself may begin the study of a district, but, in general, conservation districts develop out of residents' concern over issues that threaten their neighborhood's



Neighborhood Conservation District Controls

Ordinance 1002 generally states that "all construction, demolition or alteration that affects exterior architectural features, other than color," shall be reviewed in a neighborhood conservation district. However, the ordinance provides seven standard exemptions from review that can be adopted in a particular district. By adopting binding and non-binding categories of review, districts can be even more closely tailored to the needs of a neighborhood. The City Council order establishing the district incorporates the specific standards governing each neighborhood conservation district.

Cambridge's conservation districts incorporate binding review over major changes, such as demolition, new construction, and alterations that affect the size of a building's envelope, while providing for nonbinding, advisory review of smaller



alterations. In this way, the neighborhood is protected from large-scale change, and residents are allowed to proceed with minor architectural alterations. The sense of neighborhood character is thus protected, even though some alterations that would not normally be allowed in traditional historic districts are not prevented.

When a district is established, a commission is appointed by the City Manager to administer it. Such a commission consists of five members and three alternates and includes a mix of district residents and professionals in real estate, architecture, or historic preservation. A member of the Historical Commission serves on the commission as well.

When a neighborhood conservation district is designated, it comes under the jurisdiction of its neighborhood conservation district commission. The commission is then empowered to approve, before work begins, any new construction, demolition, or alteration that will be visible from any public way or place. No such work can be undertaken, nor can a building permit be obtained, until the commission has issued a Certificate of Appropriateness, Non-Applicability, or Hardship.

Questions and Answers for Property Owners

What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?

A Certificate of Appropriateness is a document issued by the neighborhood conservation district commission when an alteration falls within its jurisdiction and involves a publicly visible exterior architectural feature of a property. It certifies that the alterations are not "incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance or the distinctive character of the . . . district."

The certificate incorporates plans and specifications submitted as evidence of the proposed work and forms the basis of the commission's agreement with the applicant on how changes can be made to the property. Certificates are valid for six months from the date of issue. They can be extended one or more times for a period of no more than ninety days each, on the written approval of the chairman.

Do I need a certificate for interior work?

A certificate is needed to obtain a building permit in a neighborhood conservation district. But for changes to interiors or other areas that do not come under the commission's jurisdiction, a Certificate of Non-Applicability is issued. This certificate signifies that the commission's jurisdiction does not apply to the work proposed. Certificates of Non-Applicability can be issued by the commission staff immediately on receipt of an application and without a public hearing. No certificate is needed for interior work that does not require a building permit.

A Certificate of Hardship may be issued for work that is otherwise inappropriate if the commission determines, at a public hearing, that failure to approve an application would entail a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, and that the work would not be a significant detriment to the district.

Regardless of the type of certificate needed, no property in a neighborhood conservation district may be constructed, altered, or demolished unless the neighborhood conservation district commission or the Historical Commission staff has issued a certificate for the work proposed. Once the proper certificate has been issued, a building permit can be obtained and the work can go forward.

How do I apply for a certificate?

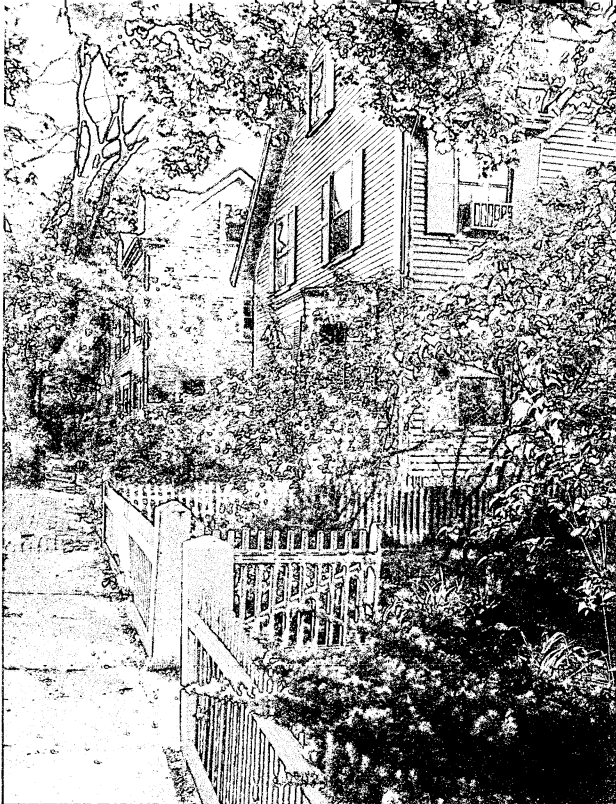
Applications for certificates are available at the Cambridge Historical Commission office. Instructions for completing the application and a list of required attachments to the application are included on the form. Completed applications should be returned to the Historical Commission office. Deadlines for submitting applications may be obtained by calling the office (617-498-9040).

How does the commission conduct its review?

Applications for all changes within the commission's jurisdiction are brought to a public hearing, which provides an open forum for discussion. Abutters to the property, the Planning Board, the City Clerk, and any others deemed to be affected are notified of the hearing fourteen days in advance. In addition, the commission is required to advertise its hearings in a newspaper of general circulation fourteen days in advance.

Are there standards for the commission's review?

The neighborhood conservation district commission considers "the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture and material of the features involved, and the relation of such features to similar features of structures in the surrounding



character. A study committee is appointed by the City Manager to report on the merits of the proposed district and to recommend the boundaries and degree of regulatory authority needed to protect it. A staff member from the Commission assists the committee in this job.

The study report takes approximately one to two years to complete; it involves canvassing neighbors and holding meetings to arrive at a consensus on the district's jurisdiction. The final report is presented to the Historical Commission for its recommendation. No less than forty-five or more than sixty days later, the proposal is considered at a public hearing. If the Commission finds that the area meets the standards for designation, the report is forwarded to the City Council with a favorable recommendation. Designations are made by a majority vote of the City Council.



Cambridge Historical Commission

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William B. King, *Chair*, Allison M. Crump, *Vice Chair*, Charles M. Sullivan, *Executive Director*
M. Wyllis Bibbins, Suzanne R. Green, Helen F. Moulton, Robert G. Neiley, Jo M. Solet, *Members*
Jennifer Jones, Anthony C. Platt, *Alternates*

December 23, 1998

To: Robert Healy, City Manager

From: Charles Sullivan, Historical Commission
Sally Zimmerman, Historical Commission

Re: Council Order #036, dated 12/7/98

I am forwarding the following report in response to Councillor Davis' order of December 7, 1998 (#036) on the potential for creating a neighborhood conservation district in the Cambridgeport-Riverside area and what protective benefits such a district might have for the neighborhood, if that is the desire of neighborhood residents.

Contents

Neighborhood Conservation Districts: purposes and procedures
Potential for creating NCDs in Cambridgeport and Riverside neighborhoods
Current planning initiatives
Potential benefits of NCDs
Conclusion
Executive Summary
Attachments

Neighborhood Conservation Districts: Purposes and Procedures

Article III of Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge City Code sets out the broad purposes of a neighborhood conservation district 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 . . . which constitute . . . distinctive features of the . . . history of the City." A neighborhood conservation district is defined as "any area within the City containing places and structures which [the Historical Commission] determines are important to the . . . history of the City, and which considered together cause such area to constitute a distinctive neighborhood or to have a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features."

Neighborhood conservation district studies are initiated either by Historical Commission vote or by petition of ten registered voters. Because the neighborhood conservation district's regulatory authority is so closely tied to the neighborhood it is intended to protect, it is the Historical Commission's policy not to initiate studies in the

with broadly-constituted, representative neighborhood groups interested in a neighborhood conservation district study and assist them in presenting information about such districts to the public and determining general support for a study petition.

Once a petition for neighborhood conservation district study has been accepted by the Historical Commission, a study committee is appointed by the City Manager for the purpose of establishing the boundaries and regulatory authority of the potential district. Upon acceptance of a study petition, a protective procedure is temporarily imposed on all properties in the study area. For a period not to exceed one year from the date of acceptance of a petition, an interim review procedure is instituted whereby all applications for building permits in the study area are subject to Historical Commission review as if they were already in a designated neighborhood conservation district. The potentially onerous nature of the interim review procedure necessitates that substantial groundwork within the neighborhood be done prior to initiating a neighborhood conservation district study and that a reasonable consensus for the district is present. Ensuring a broad-based consensus on the benefits of a conservation district also helps to minimize the study time required and hence, the potential burden that the interim review may place on individual property owners.

Upon completion of the study and after public hearings and further Historical Commission review, a majority of the City Council must vote to designate a neighborhood conservation district in a council order. The district is then established and a neighborhood-based commission is appointed to administer the district. Neighborhood conservation districts generally protect neighborhood character by requiring review and approval of major changes to district properties. Typically, such actions as demolishing an existing building, constructing a new building, or making large-scale changes or additions to an existing building require the review and approval of the neighborhood conservation district commission.

Potential for creating neighborhood conservation districts in Cambridgeport and Riverside neighborhoods

Historical development patterns

When Cambridge became a city in 1846, Cambridgeport constituted the city's Second Ward and encompassed the entire area east of Dana Street, excluding East Cambridge, and from Inman Square south to the Charles River. Cambridgeport's economy was based at first on transportation spurred by construction of the West Boston (now Longfellow) Bridge in 1793, and later on industrial development made possible by the construction in 1852 of a rail spur at the neighborhood's eastern edge. Settlement areas were defined by the area's marshy topography; most of the residences were built on higher ground, while industrial uses often occupied drained and filled land. Early settlement focussed around Central Square, along Broadway, Harvard, Washington and Main streets, and on the streets below the Square as far south as Perry Street. Additional settlement clustered north and south of Massachusetts Avenue west of Central Square in what is now known as Mid Cambridge and Riverside.

For planning purposes, the Cambridge Historical Commission's *Cambridgeport* survey volume, published in 1971, delineated four smaller neighborhoods within the historically-larger Cambridgeport area, two north of Massachusetts Avenue and Cambridgeport South and Riverside south of Massachusetts Avenue. In this memo, the boundaries of those sub-areas will identify the Cambridgeport and Riverside neighborhoods (*see attached map*).

Cambridgeport

What is now known as Cambridgeport (Cambridgeport South sub-area) is characterized by four parallel streets running north-south through the neighborhood (Pleasant, Magazine, Pearl, and Brookline). The grid of long through streets and shorter cross streets creates a 19th-century suburban rhythm not common in Cambridge. The neighborhood developed, generally, from Massachusetts Avenue south to the river but was not fully laid out and built up until the early 20th century. Earlier houses, thus, tend to be in the northern parts of the neighborhood, with more recent structures in sections to the south.

Architecturally, the neighborhood contains a mix of 19th-century styles, including Greek Revival, Italianate, mansard, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival single, two- and three-family houses. Within this mix of residential architecture are a number of architecturally-distinguished church buildings and church complexes and a few small corner commercial buildings. Socially, the neighborhood originally housed a small number of professional people and commuters to Boston, along with a large number of artisans, clerks, and laborers who worked locally in the businesses and small industries located in Cambridgeport and East Cambridge. By the end of the 19th-century, immigrants far outnumbered the native-born population, and the industrial base had grown substantially. By 1930, Cambridge was second in the state in industrial production, with much of that industry located in the swath of filled land between Cambridgeport and East Cambridge.

Riverside

In the Riverside area, development generally took place somewhat later, although the streets on higher ground just south of Massachusetts Avenue were beginning to be developed by the 1850s. Architecturally, Riverside is generally characterized by smaller single-family houses, two-family houses, and three-deckers and was mostly built up by the end of the 19th century. Because it occupies a roughly triangular area bounded by Massachusetts Avenue, Western Avenue, and the Charles River, Riverside's streets lay out on an angle, creating a sense of containment and enclosure.

On the western edges of the neighborhood, Harvard Square and Harvard University provided the economic base. The city's strong 19th-century industrial economy provided the incentive for development elsewhere in Riverside. Socially, the area known as the Lower Marsh, west of Putnam Avenue, and another area along Franklin Street (once known as "Paddy's Hollow") had a largely Irish population.

Riverside is home also to a long-standing African-American community established by the end of the 19th century around Howard Street.

Defining potential study areas

The earliest and most intact settlement areas are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Salem-Auburn Streets and Upper Magazine Street National Register Districts. Two other protected historic areas are the Fort Washington Local Historic District, which preserves the remaining earthworks of a Revolutionary War fortification and 19th-century park on Waverly Street, and the Hastings Square National Register District, a post-Civil War residential square at the southern end of Brookline Avenue.

While any of these existing protected areas could form the nucleus of a neighborhood conservation district study, ideally, such a study should look at a much larger area for possible designation. Studies of neighborhood conservation district potential for Riverside and Cambridgeport should probably be initiated using the broadly-drawn boundaries of those two existing historic sub-areas. Study of the sub-areas would be expected to result in narrower and more tightly-drawn boundaries for a neighborhood conservation district or districts.

Current planning initiatives

The Community Development Department is currently engaged in a comprehensive neighborhood study of Cambridgeport and has produced a set of preliminary recommendations for enhancing quality of life in the neighborhood. Several of the recommendations in the Housing section specifically deal with issues which could be addressed through the regulatory mechanism of a neighborhood conservation district. Those recommendations are:

- “New developments . . . should complement the existing neighborhood character and this should be ensured with a comprehensive design review process which involves the community. Among other things, this process could help limit the size and type of buildings constructed . . .”
- “Encourage the rehabilitation of old buildings where possible to help preserve the neighborhood character.”

Neighborhood conservation districts and local historic districts* are the only currently existing programs available in the city to achieve the goals listed above. The primary purposes of the three existing neighborhood conservation districts in Cambridge (Half Crown NCD, Mid Cambridge NCD, Avon Hill NCD) are to achieve similar goals in their respective neighborhoods. In addition, commissions are prohibited from making “any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of preventing developments incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance or the distinctive character

* local historic districts, such as the Old Cambridge and Fort Washington historic districts, are established under state enabling legislation which mandates review of all exterior changes to properties and allows only for certain prescribed exemptions; see chapter 40C, MGL, for more information.

of the . . . neighborhood conservation district.”** It is the conservation district’s purpose to ensure the appropriateness and congruity of proposed changes to its character.

Other recommendations in the areas of Urban Design, Land Use and Zoning, Open Space, and Transportation would be complemented by the presence of a neighborhood conservation district. A neighborhood conservation district would provide additional support and direction toward realizing the neighborhood’s recommendations for:

- improving entrances to the city;
- establishing transition zones between commercial and residential uses;
- limiting overall height, scale and density;
- improving open space amenities; and
- mitigating traffic impacts.

The Mid Cambridge NCD and Avon Hill NCD both seek to limit scale and density of development in their respective neighborhoods; the Mid Cambridge NCD also includes provision for considering parking impacts when reviewing applications in the district. With regard to the general capacity of a neighborhood conservation district to enable public dialogue on projects affecting a neighborhood, it has been the Historical Commission’s experience that the neighborhood conservation district is sometimes the only public forum required for projects that can have a considerable impact on neighborhood character and quality of life.

Potential Benefits of Neighborhood Conservation Districts

Among the potential benefits of neighborhood conservation districts are the following:

- providing a neutral, neighborhood forum on managing the direction and nature of changes to the district’s character and quality of life;
- conserving the scale, appearance, and materials of neighborhood buildings;
- enabling a flexible review authority tailored to neighborhood wishes;
- providing for neighborhood-based commission membership to conduct reviews;
- establishing a professionally-qualified commission that is available for technical advice on design issues.

While potentially beneficial, neighborhood conservation districts also require a substantial commitment on the part of neighborhood residents. The required commitment comes 1) in the form of individuals willing to devote time and energy to the process of establishing and administering the district, and 2) in the form of property owners willing to accept some additional regulation over the issuance of building permits in exchange for the neighborhood’s enhanced capacity to manage changes that affect its character.

** Chapter 2.78, section 220, B., Cambridge City Code

Conclusion

The Cambridgeport and Riverside neighborhoods possess distinctive patterns of settlement, architecturally and socially, that appear to meet the criteria for NCD designation in Article III. It is not possible, without further study, to specify how one or more NCDs might be crafted to conserve the Cambridgeport and Riverside neighborhoods. However, the potential for NCD designation would seem to be present, given sufficient support from within the neighborhoods to sustain the petitioning, study, and designation of such districts. Completion of the Community Development Department's neighborhood study may yield consensus on a set of shared goals which could form the basis of support for the protective benefits of regulation through neighborhood conservation districts for the area.

Executive Summary

Neighborhood conservation districts (NCDs)

- *preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the city and improve the quality of its environment
- *contain places and structures which are important to the history of the city and which constitute a distinctive neighborhood with a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features
- *are initiated through voter petition and Historical Commission vote
- *require neighborhood consensus to accept additional review
- *generally regulate demolition, new construction, and large-scale alterations to buildings and structures in district

Cambridgeport

- *regular street grid not common in Cambridge
- *mix of mid to late 19th-century housing with notable church complexes and a few commercial buildings
- *originally developed as middle-class residential area for commuters, clerks, and laborers in 19th-century Cambridge industries

Riverside

- *triangular street layout and sense of containment
- *mix of mid to late 19th-century housing with smaller single family houses, two-family houses and three-deckers
- *distinctive neighborhoods historically settled by African- and Irish-American communities

Current planning initiatives

- *Community Development Department neighborhood study contains Housing recommendations compatible with NCD purposes
- *Additional recommendations for Urban Design, Land Use and Zoning, Open Space and Transportation are supported by NCD purposes

Potential benefits of NCDs

- *provide neutral, neighborhood forum on managing direction and nature of changes to character and quality of life
- *conserve scale, appearance, and materials of neighborhood buildings
- *enable flexible review authority tailored to neighborhood wishes
- *provide for neighborhood-based commission membership
- *establish professionally-qualified commission available for technical advice on design issues

Conclusion

- *Cambridgeport and Riverside appear to contain areas eligible for NCD
- *Architecture and social history is consistent with NCD criteria
- *CDD study may yield grassroots consensus necessary to begin study effort

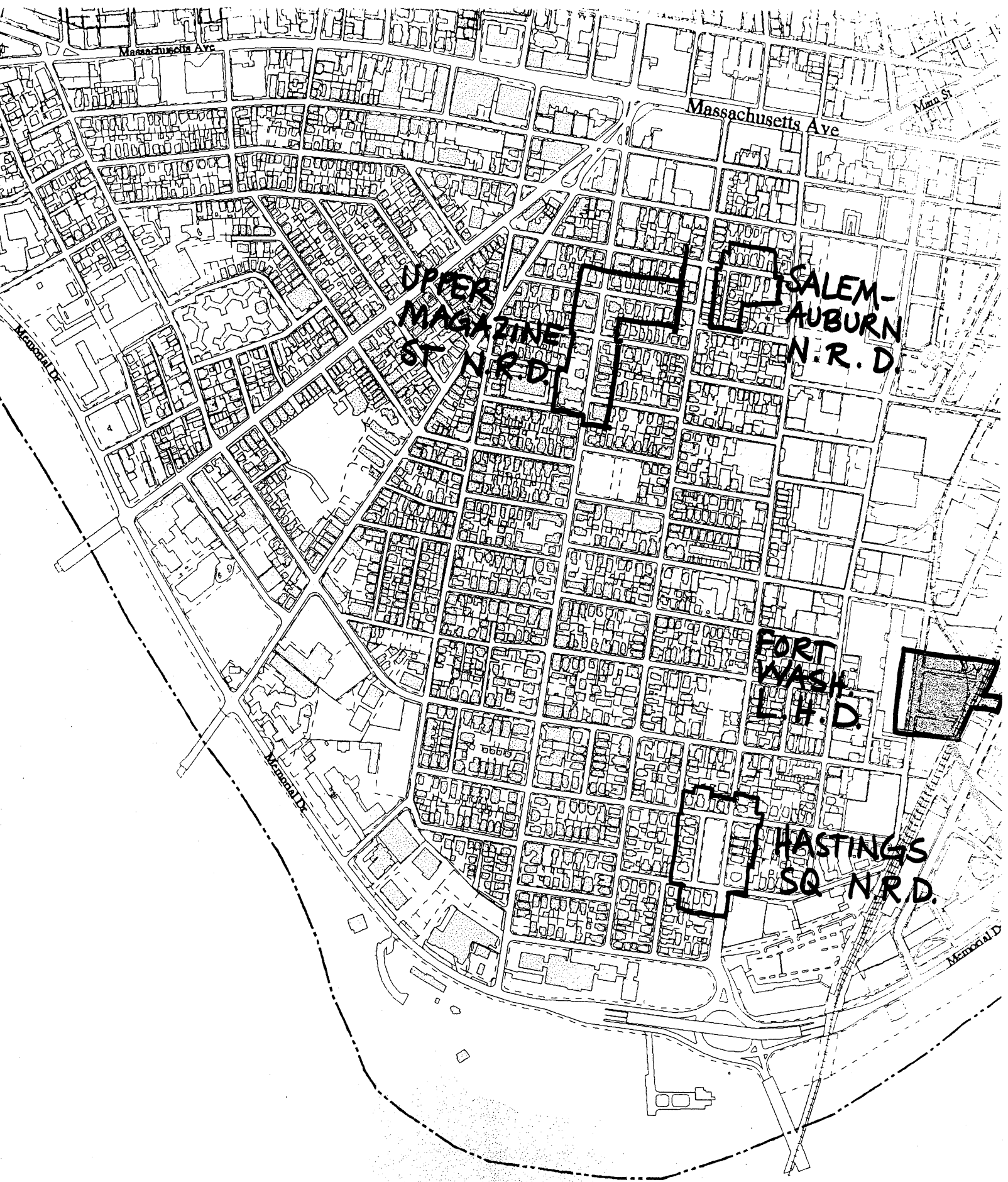
Attachments

1. Second Ward, Walling map, 1854.
2. Existing National Register districts in Cambridgeport/Riverside
3. Cambridgeport Residential sub-area map, showing Cambridgeport South and Riverside boundaries, *Cambridgeport*, 1971, p. 140
4. "Neighborhood Conservation Districts in Cambridge", Cambridge Historical Commission brochure



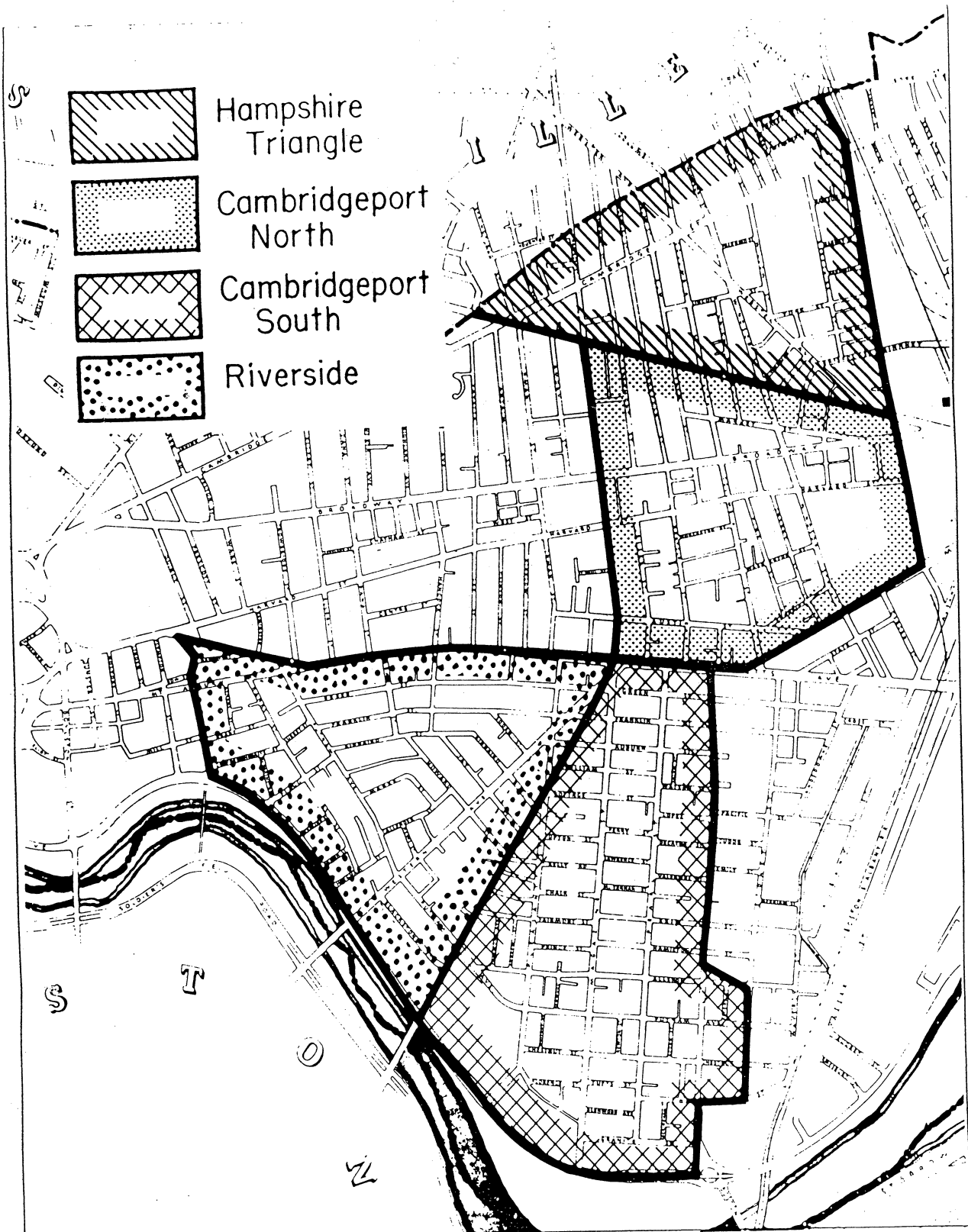
WARD TWO, WALLING MAP, 1854

Attachment 1



ATTACHMENT 2

EXISTING NATIONAL REGISTER AND LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS



Attachment 3

CAMBRIDGEPORT RESIDENTIAL SUBAREAS



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139

TEL. 349-4300
FAX. 349-4307



EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
ROBERT W. HEALY
City Manager

RICHARD C. ROSSI
Deputy City Manager

January 11, 1999

To The Honorable, The City Council:

Please find attached a response to Awaiting Report Item No. 27, regarding a report on the potential for creating a neighborhood conservation district in the Cambridgeport-Riverside area, received from Historical Commission Director Charles Sullivan.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/mec
Attachment

Consent Agenda #14

S-7

Relative to AR 27 regarding a report on the potential for creating a neighborhood conservation district in the Cambridgeport-Riverside area.

In City Council January 11, 1999

PLACED ON FILE