



# City of Cambridge

Consent Agenda #5

**IN CITY COUNCIL**

March 17, 2003

ORDERED: That the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House, 583 Mount Auburn Street, be designated as a protected landmark pursuant to Chapter 2.78, Article III, Section 2.78.180 of the Code of the City of Cambridge, as recommended by vote of the Cambridge Historical Commission on February 6, 2003. The premises so designated are defined as parcel 9 of assessor's map 251 and recorded in book 19379, page 472 of the South Middlesex Registry of Deeds.

This designation is justified by the significant associations of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House (583 Mount Auburn Street), which is historically significant as a part of the Mount Auburn Cemetery, the first garden cemetery in the United States, which constructed and owned the Italianate building until 1929. The Reception House served to accommodate visitors to the cemetery, a nationally known 19<sup>th</sup>-century tourist attraction. Architecturally, the Mount Auburn Reception House is significant as one of only two existing buildings in Cambridge by Nathaniel J. Bradlee, a prominent Boston architect. As a building type, the reception house is also a rare, and perhaps unique structure; it is doubtful that any other cemeteries in the U.S. ever constructed structures specifically for the purpose of accommodating visitors to their grounds.

The effect of this designation shall be that no construction activity can take place within the designated area, and no action can be taken affecting the appearance of 583 Mount Auburn Street, what would in either case be visible from a public way, without review by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Non-Applicability, as the case may be. In making determinations, the Commission shall be guided by the terms of the landmark designation report, and by Section VII, Standards and Criteria, of the landmark designation report, and by the applicable sections of Article III, Chapter 2.78.140-270 of the Cambridge Municipal Code.

In City Council March 17, 2003.

Adopted by a yea and nay vote:-

Yeas 9; Nays 0; Absent 0:

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

*D. Margaret Drury*

ATTEST:-

D. Margaret Drury  
City Clerk



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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William B. King, *Chair*, Allison M. Crump, *Vice Chair*, Charles M. Sullivan, *Executive Director*

M. Wyllis Bibbins, Robert C. Crocker, Suzanne R. Green, Frank Shirley, Jo M. Solet, *Members*

Jacob D. Albert, Bruce A. Irving, Jennifer Jones, *Alternates*

Date: March 3, 2003

To: Robert W. Healy, City Manager

From: Charles M. Sullivan, Executive Director *CMS*

Re: Mt. Auburn Cemetery Reception House Landmark Study Report

Attached please find 60 copies of the Final Study Report for designating the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House, at 583 Mount Auburn Street, as a protected landmark. The Cambridge Historical Commission unanimously voted on February 6 to recommend the designation of the Reception House to the City Council.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

**Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House  
583 Mount Auburn Street**

**Landmark Designation Report**

Prepared by Amy McFeeters (Boston University Preservation Studies Program)  
and Sally Zimmerman, Cambridge Historical Commission  
December 8, 1992, updated November 20, 2002, March 4, 2003

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The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House, 583 Mount Auburn Street, constructed in 1870, is historically significant as a part of the Mount Auburn Cemetery, the first garden cemetery in the United States, which built and owned the Italianate building until 1929. The Reception House served to accommodate visitors to the cemetery, a nationally-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century tourist attraction.

Architecturally, the Mount Auburn Reception House is significant as one of only two existing buildings in Cambridge by Nathaniel J. Bradlee, a prominent mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston architect. As a building type, the Reception House is also a rare, and perhaps unique, structure; it is doubtful that any other cemeteries in the U.S. constructed structures specifically for the purpose of accommodating visitors to their grounds.

## 1. Location and Economic Status

### A. Address, Parcel Number and Zoning

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is located at 583 Mount Auburn Street on Assessor's Map 251, Parcel 9. The land and building have a combined assessed value of \$334,200. The building is located on a 5400 square foot lot in an Office-1 zone, which allows for business, professional, and some institutional office, parking lot, and single and two-family residential uses as of right with an FAR of .75 and a height limitation of 35 feet. Townhouse development, congregate housing, and multi-family residences are allowed by Special Permit of the Planning Board. Retail uses are not allowed. The building's current use is, therefore, non-conforming.

### B. Ownership and Occupancy

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is currently owned by Mary A. Canniff and Paul John Kilgarriff, trustees of the Granite Trading Realty Trust. It currently operates as a showroom and offices for Mt. Auburn Memorials, Inc., a retailer of cemetery headstones. The property is recorded at the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, book 19379, page 472.

### C. Area Description

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is located in the most western area of Old Cambridge. Mount Auburn Street marks the boundary of Cambridge and Watertown, and all but the northeastern corner of the Mount Auburn Cemetery, which is directly south of the Reception House, is in Watertown. The reception building is located just south of the Larchwood neighborhood, a 1915 planned residential subdivision with a curvilinear street pattern and single-family houses on suburban, landscaped lots.

By the early 20th century, the area of Mount Auburn Street surrounding the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House had begun to be developed with commercial uses. Gas stations and office buildings now dominate the north side of the street opposite the main gate of the Mount Auburn Cemetery to the south. Commercial development continues beyond Aberdeen Street to the west, with low-rise offices and a strip mall grocery store complex. To the east, 1920s apartment buildings occupy a triangular block of land formed where Brattle Street forks off of Mount Auburn Street.

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is flanked on the west by 587 Mount Auburn Street, a 1960s filling station that replaced an earlier 1922 station on the site; on the north by the Larchwood residential neighborhood; and on the east by 581 Mount Auburn Street, a 1974 townhouse structure with below-grade parking garages. Mount Auburn Street is a major arterial roadway, heavily trafficked as a connector from western suburbs to Cambridge and Storrow and Memorial Drives.

### D. Planning Issues

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is something of a relic along this stretch of Mount Auburn Street. Its unusual use and small scale reflects an earlier era of commercial development on the street when retail and other uses dependent on the cemetery grew up around its gates.

The site has been owned and occupied by Mt. Auburn Memorials, Inc. since 1929. Mt. Auburn Memorials is part of the W. C. Canniff & Sons, Inc. monument company, whose main showrooms and offices are located in Quincy and Roslindale. The monument business does not depend on high-volume sales and the company's overhead on the property is not substantial. So, while it is unlikely ownership will change in the near future, current property values in Cambridge may create opportunities or financial pressures to sell. The surrounding uses all operate on a more competitive basis and all of the other cemetery-related retail uses in the area have been replaced with higher density structures.

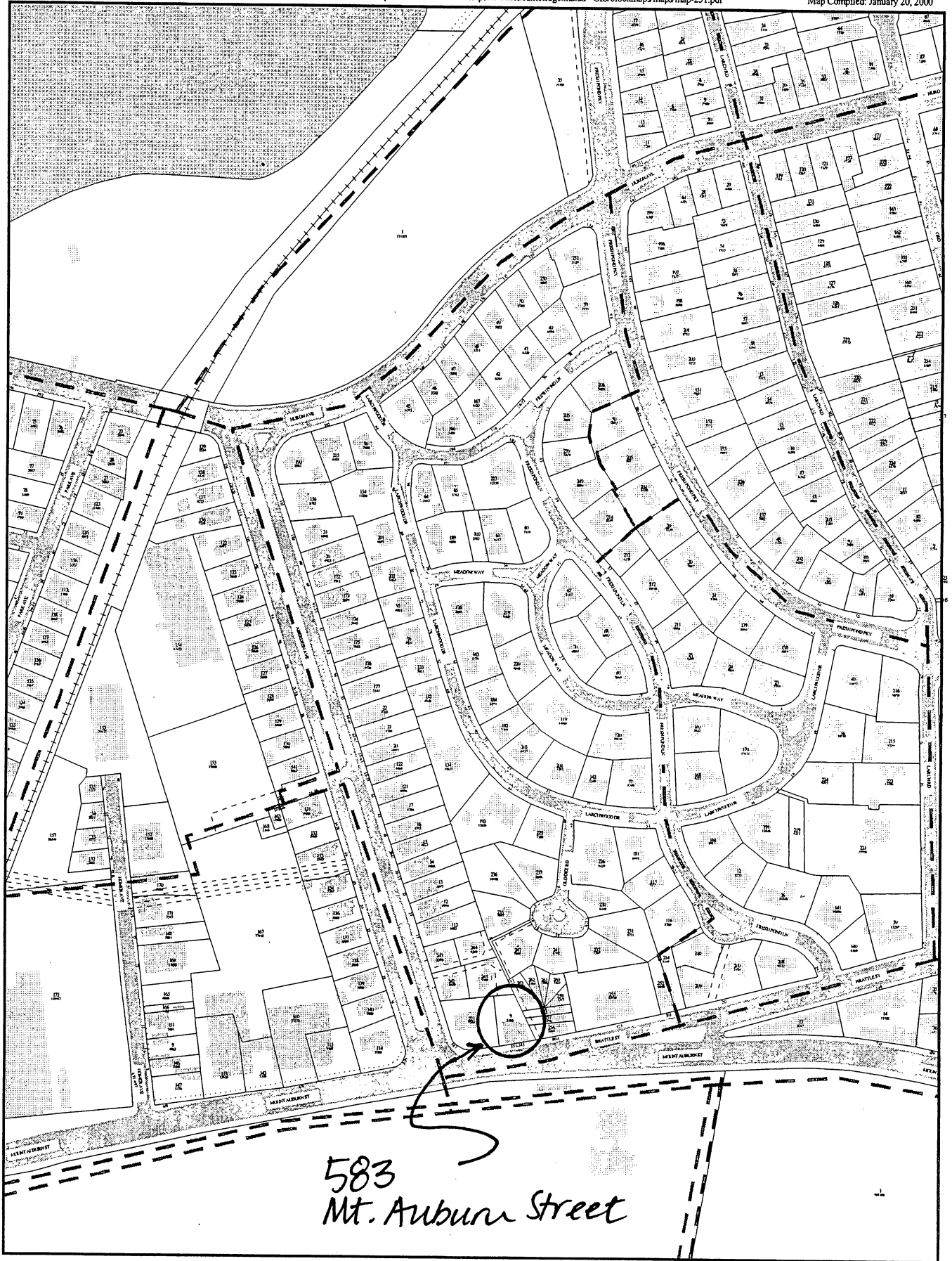
Should the property change hands, it may be difficult to identify a suitable new use for the structure and pressure to clear the site is likely to result. In the Office-1 zone, the allowable FAR is .75. The present structure, which contains approximately 1100 square feet, has an FAR of .20; the zoning allows a structure of approximately 4000 square feet. Office-1 zoning would also allow four dwelling units to be built on the property, though the lot, the east side lot line of which runs on a tangent from Mount Auburn Street, would likely be non-conforming as to setbacks and zoning relief would likely be required to develop the lot to its full potential.

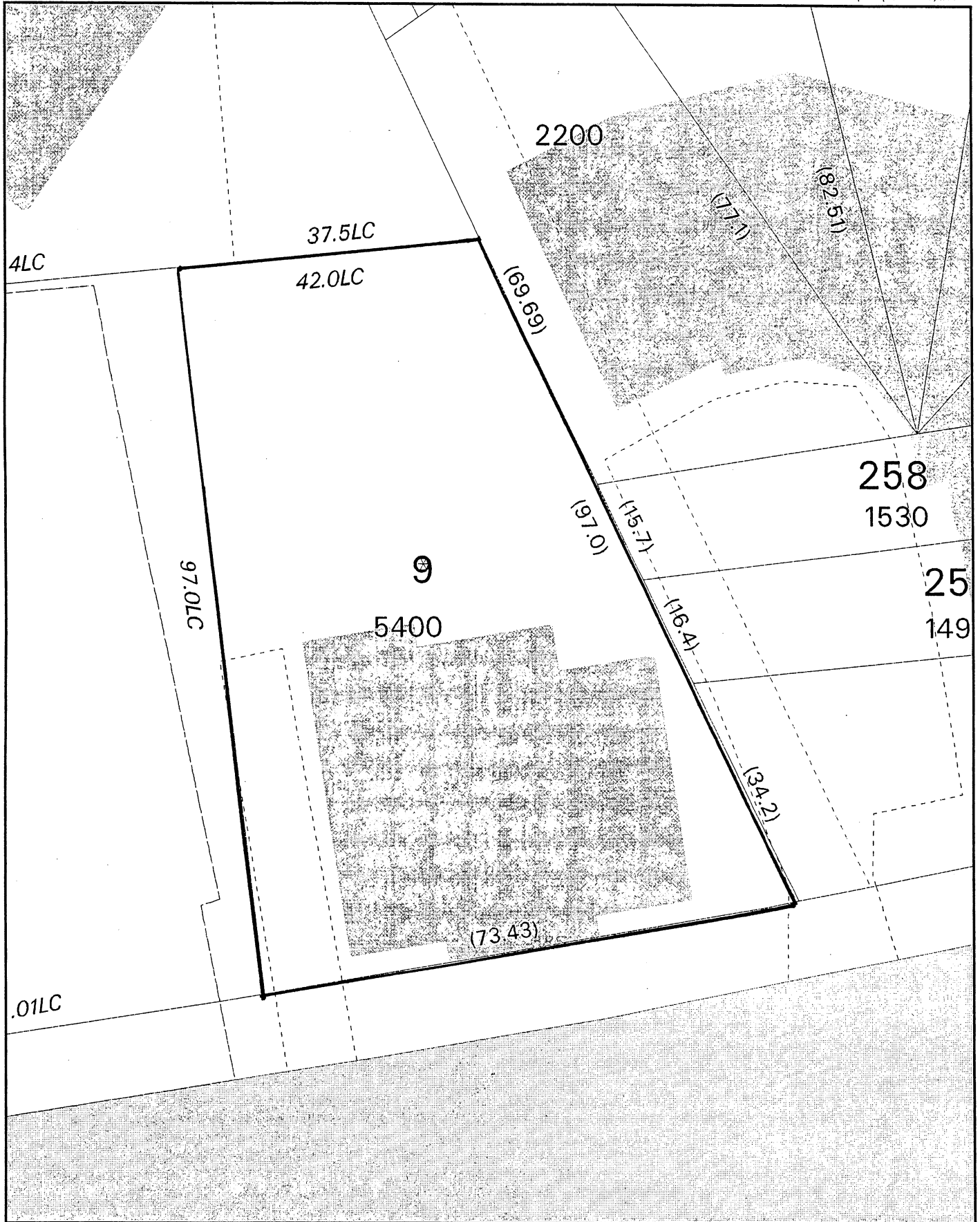
If the site were not cleared, it would still be feasible to capture additional allowable FAR through further construction on the undeveloped back yard of the property. The manner in which such construction could be achieved, and its potential impact on the architectural integrity of the Reception House gives further cause for concern.

A major drawback to the site, however, is traffic constraints. The building is sited quite close to the side lot lines on both sides and access to the back of the property is via a narrow driveway on the west side. With a major intersection just west of the reception house and a difficult merge at Brattle and Mount Auburn streets directly in front of the reception house, the traffic patterns in the area are complex and impede access to the driveway. It seems likely that traffic and access constraints might limit to some extent the full development of the lot or the potential uses or reuses of the property.

Despite constraints, the distinctive historical and architectural qualities of the Reception House, and the capacity of the lot to accommodate further construction that would be sensitive to the original building, support the reuse and continued viability of the structure. The Reception House retains its basic form and later changes to the exterior could easily be reversed and the original details restored.

E. Map





City of Cambridge, Massachusetts

**583-585 MOUNT AUBURN ST**  
*Mt. Auburn Cemetery*  
*Reception House*



Parcel Map

Maplot: 251-9

## II. Description

### A. Type and Use

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House was built in 1870 following the design of Nathaniel J. Bradlee. It originally served as the waiting house for visitors to the cemetery and provided refreshments, shelter, and toilet facilities. At some point in the building's history, the basement may have been used for the winter storage of delicate bulbs or plants. For over seventy years, it has been the location of Mt. Auburn Memorials, a monument company showroom and sales office.

### B. Physical Description

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is an Italianate style, one-story frame structure with a low-pitched hipped roof. Seven bays long and two bays wide, it is oriented with its long side facing south toward Mount Auburn Street. It has a one story piazza which runs the entire length of the south elevation. The original drawings by Nathaniel J. Bradlee are in the Boston Athenaeum and in the Mount Auburn Cemetery archives.

The Mount Auburn Reception House is symmetrical and has a primary central entrance on the south facade. One red brick chimney rises at the eastern peak of the hipped roof above the sixth bay. Originally there were two matched interior corbeled brick chimneys. The foundation is also of brick.

The interior plan configuration of the Reception House remains basically as it was designed, but it is in unrestored condition. The building as constructed was divided into three major areas: the central reception hall with a vaulted roof, the refreshment area in the western section, and the ladies' waiting room and men's and ladies' rest rooms in the eastern section. The ceilings have been lowered, and the rooms, now used as offices and showroom space, are minimally modernized.

The building has typical Italianate fenestration of 19½ by 46 inch, two-over-two sash with molded casings, which originally had footed sills. Most of the windows are original. When erected, the building was sheathed in narrow, wood clapboards with plain, narrow corner boards. The building is now sheathed in stucco painted white. Elevation drawings by Bradlee indicate that the roof was to be polychromatic in a banded pattern. The roof is now covered in monochromatic light gray asphalt shingles.

The principal facade of the building is 46 feet wide with a central pedimented cross-gable which projects from the piazza. The piazza roof was originally supported by ten delicate chamfered square posts, four of which have been removed, and the remainder of which have been covered in stucco. The jigsaw flat board railing that originally enclosed the piazza has also been removed.

The main entrance is centered under the projecting pediment, with three flanking windows on either side of the entrance. The wide frieze board around the piazza is decorated with panels of incised scrollwork which divide a modified Doric entablature aligned with the posts. The wide overhanging eaves are bracketed, a typical Italianate detail. The central pediment is decorated with

incised decoration and holds a cartouche and clock. Running along the roof of the piazza and projecting from the western side of the building is a modern crane track and crane, used to lift tombstones. A lightbox sign attached perpendicularly to the facade advertises the memorial company.

The original section of the west elevation is 24 feet long, with a two-over-two sash window in the rear bay and a large single-pane window in the forward bay, which was once a secondary entrance with a small entrance porch, now gone. A brick addition projects to the rear of this wall. This addition contains a safe built when the building was used as offices for the cemetery in the early 20th century. There are two basement windows visible in the foundation. The frieze board continues around the building, but on the side and rear elevations it is plain rather than incised as on the piazza.

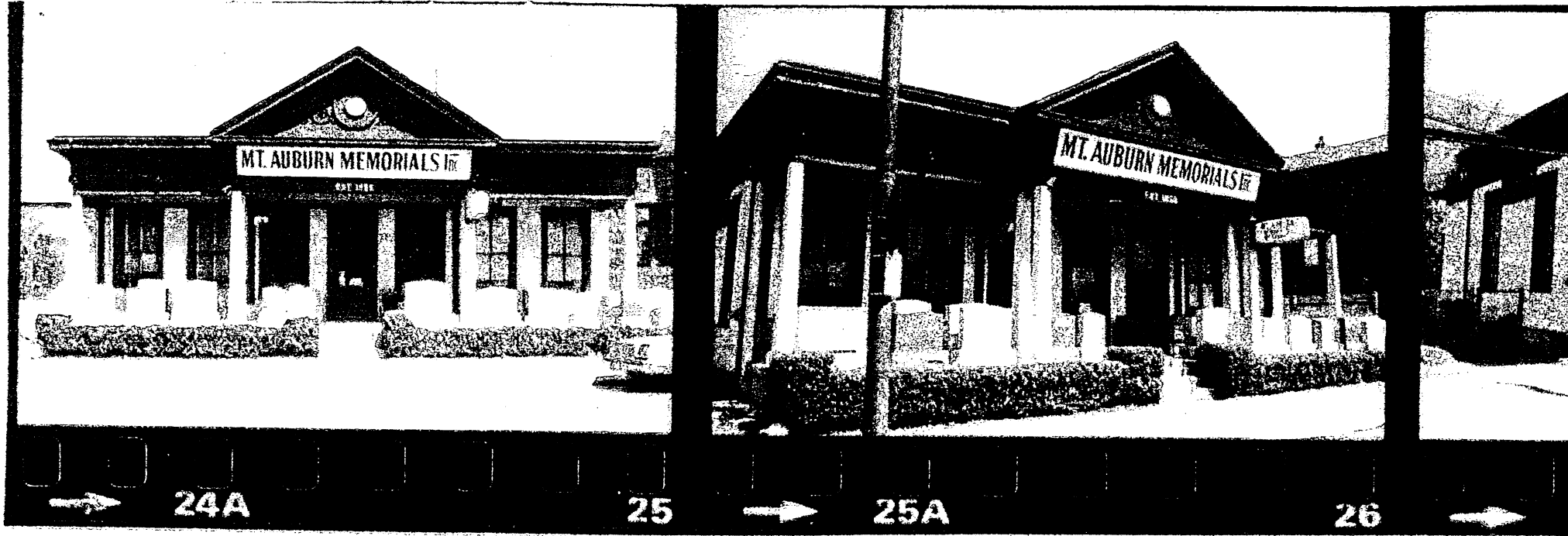
The east elevation remains in its original configuration, two bays deep with two windows, although the windows have been boarded over.

The north (rear) elevation is still sheathed in clapboards and has a pedimented central three-bay portico with a paneled double door in the center. There are no windows on this facade, although original drawings show two two-over-two sash windows on either side of the portico. The pediment is plain except for an ocular window. The symmetry of this elevation is disrupted by the windowless brick vault addition that obscures the western half of the wall. Running along the central and eastern portion of the wall is an asphalt-roofed porch covering the basement level.

The back of the property is open and grassy and used for storage and display of tombstones. A gravel and asphalt driveway runs along the west side elevation. Chain link fencing encloses the lot.

### C. Photographs

*Mt. Auburn Cemetery*



*1110 / 24A*

*25A*

*taken May 30*

### III. History of the Property

#### A. Historical Development Patterns

##### 1. Deed History of the Parcel

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is located on land that was once part of the 40-acre Jonas Wyeth estate. The parcel was six-eighths of a larger parcel of land left by Jonas Wyeth to his widow, Elizabeth. Two single daughters of Jonas Wyeth, Elizabeth and Mary, bought the parcel from their six married siblings in 1854 (book 700, page 42, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds), and lived in a house at the east side of the parcel until the Cemetery purchased the property in 1868.

On November 28, 1868, the sisters sold the property to Alexander McDonald, a marble worker, who by that time owned and operated a stone yard on Jonas Wyeth's former estate (see book 1073, page 168, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds). On the same day, McDonald sold the parcel to the Proprietors of the Mount Auburn Cemetery, a transaction planned months earlier (see book 1073, page 169, Middlesex South Registry of Deeds). This parcel lay north of Mount Auburn Street almost directly across from the main gate of the cemetery.

Two years later, The Cambridge Chronicle reported (February 26, 1870) the frame of a “new building to be located on the Wyeth estate. . . directly opposite the main entrance” had been raised on February 22. The Chronicle noted that the “two lodges at the front entrance of the Cemetery at Mount Auburn, are of too contracted dimensions for the accommodation of visitors” and were “inconvenient even for business offices.” The paper gave the dimensions of the “New Reception House” and described a “general reception room” at the new building’s center to the right of which was a “ladies room” with “two dressing rooms, one for gentlemen and the other for ladies” at the rear. To the left of the entrance was a room “13 ft. by 24, to be used for a refreshment saloon.”

The small, one-story Reception House provided space for cemetery visitors to wait for funerals, begin tours or rest. It was used in that capacity until 1898, when Story Chapel and new offices were built within the cemetery. After 1898, the Reception House is referred to in the annual reports of the cemetery as the old office building. Mount Auburn Cemetery owned the property until 1928, when it was sold to the Granite Trading Realty Trust, which operates Mt. Auburn Memorials Inc.

(In addition to the Reception House, Mount Auburn Cemetery owned other property outside the cemetery grounds: from 1850 to 1936, the cemetery maintained greenhouses, maintenance buildings and a Superintendent’s House [1856] at 228 Brattle Street on a 59,555 square-foot parcel that was sold for residential development in 1939 and is now Brattle Circle.)

##### 2. Development History of the Parcel and Surroundings

In the 18th century, this area of Cambridge lay just west of the Tory estates which lined Brattle Street. Approximately 1.5 miles from the town center, this peripheral area remained agricultural until the late 19th century. Intensive development did not begin until after World War I. Farms, such as the Wyeth Estate, on a part of which the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House now

sits, and the neighboring Stratton farm, predominated. In 1808, part of the Wyeth Estate and some of the Stratton farm, totaling 38 acres, was purchased by the rich Salem merchant William Gray for his summer residence, called The Larches. This mansion, built in 1804-5 and surrounded by ornamental gardens and fields, was the last property on Brattle Street established as a traditional country seat, the westernmost outpost of West Cambridge.

The land west of The Larches was farmland owned by the Wyeth family in whose ownership it remained until the mid-19th century. A part of the land was acquired in 1867 by Alexander McDonald, who established a stoneworks there, conveniently close to the cemetery. McDonald's stoneworks, with a railroad spur for delivering marble and granite, was the first of several (among which is Mt. Auburn Memorials) that have supplied monuments to the nearby cemeteries, which included not just Mount Auburn Cemetery, but by 1853, the new Cambridge Cemetery and the Catholic Cemetery, established in 1870 farther along Mount Auburn Street in Watertown. The parcel on which the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House sits was owned by two Wyeth descendants until it was sold to the cemetery in 1868.

The Mount Auburn Reception House was already 45 years old when The Larches estate was subdivided by the heirs of William Gray in 1915. The Larchwood neighborhood was designed by Henry V. Hubbard of the Olmsted firm, and developed by F. W. Norris and Company. The winding, picturesque roads are characteristic of the Olmsted style of landscape design, and the plan purposely preserved specimens of Gray's botanical garden. The neighborhood is composed of Georgian Revival houses built up until the late 1940s. Aberdeen Avenue, which defines the western limit of the neighborhood, was plotted in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century but was not developed with two-family houses until the 1920s.

Jonas Wyeth's 40-acre farm was located directly across from the area known as Stone's Woods or Sweet Auburn, 72 acres of wooded land which was to become Mount Auburn Cemetery. This land originally belonged to Simon Stone, who farmed it in colonial times. The area was first called Stone's Woods, after the colonist, and renamed Sweet Auburn in 1801 after the poem "The Deserted Village" by Oliver Goldsmith. The overgrown farm, with ruins and panoramic views of the Charles River and beyond, was considered one of the most picturesque locations near Boston.

It was also a prime spot for development. It was located on a major public way and fronted the Charles River, along which mills, factories, and warehouses were being built. George Watson Brimmer, a merchant, bought the land in 1825, intending to build a private residence there. By 1830, however, the economic depression and Brimmer's own failing health discouraged his establishment of a country seat. He did, however, want to preserve the trees and topography of the area for the public.

Dr. Jacob Bigelow, who first proposed a rural cemetery for Boston, eagerly acquired the land in 1830 when Brimmer offered it. The rolling terrain, with varied trees, ponds, old orchards, hills, valleys, and panoramic views, was ideal for the landscaped cemetery Bigelow envisioned. The land was consecrated as the Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, and the first burial there was in 1832.

The cemetery proved to be enormously influential and within a decade, similar rural cemeteries had been established in a number of cities, including Philadelphia (Laurel Hill, 1836), Brooklyn

(Green-Wood, 1838), Cincinnati (Spring Grove, 1845) and Boston (Forest Hills, 1848). Much of the cemetery's appeal came from its outstanding horticultural qualities and by 1845, a regular hourly omnibus ran from Boston to the cemetery gates delivering families for whom a walk in the cemetery was a pleasant, inexpensive and morally edifying excursion. The popularity of the cemetery as a destination was to influence the construction of the Reception House in 1870.

Another outgrowth of the success of the cemetery was the establishment of support businesses in the immediate surroundings. As documented in Northwest Cambridge (Krim, 1977), this section of Cambridge, on the periphery of settlement and topographically limited by swamps and glacial outwash, has historically been the site of "fringe" uses. These uses included the cemetery itself, but also activities related to the cemetery, notably, nurseries and monument works. The earliest of these was the stoneworks of Alexander McDonald (1867), but other companies followed, including George R. Sands & Sons monuments (1879) at 457 Mount Auburn Street (demolished 1980) and more recently Mt. Auburn Memorials.

Another local business were florists, including the Thomas Dee Nursery, a 9.5-acre property adjoining McDonald's 12.5-acre stoneworks site. Even after the development of those two large properties in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, a retail florist, Hoffmann Florists maintained extensive greenhouses and a salesroom at 575-581 Mount Auburn Street (demolished 1974). Mt. Auburn Memorials is a vestige of these earlier cemetery-related "fringe" retail uses.

## B. Bibliography

### General Sources

Annual Reports of the Trustees' of Mount Auburn Cemetery, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1922, 1929.

Guffy, Karen A. "The Architectural Drawings of Nathaniel J. Bradlee, 1853-1875." The Boston Athenaeum, 1984.

Cambridge Historical Commission. Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge, Report Four, Old Cambridge. Bainbridge Bunting and Robert Nylander. Cambridge, 1973.

Cemetery of Mount Auburn Proprietors' and Trustees' Records Vol. 4, February 6, 1865-May 10, 1870.

Index of Bradlee Plans, Vol. 21, 1870. Boston Athenaeum.

Linden-Ward, Blanche. Silent City on a Hill. Ohio State University Press, Columbus. 1989.

### Government Records

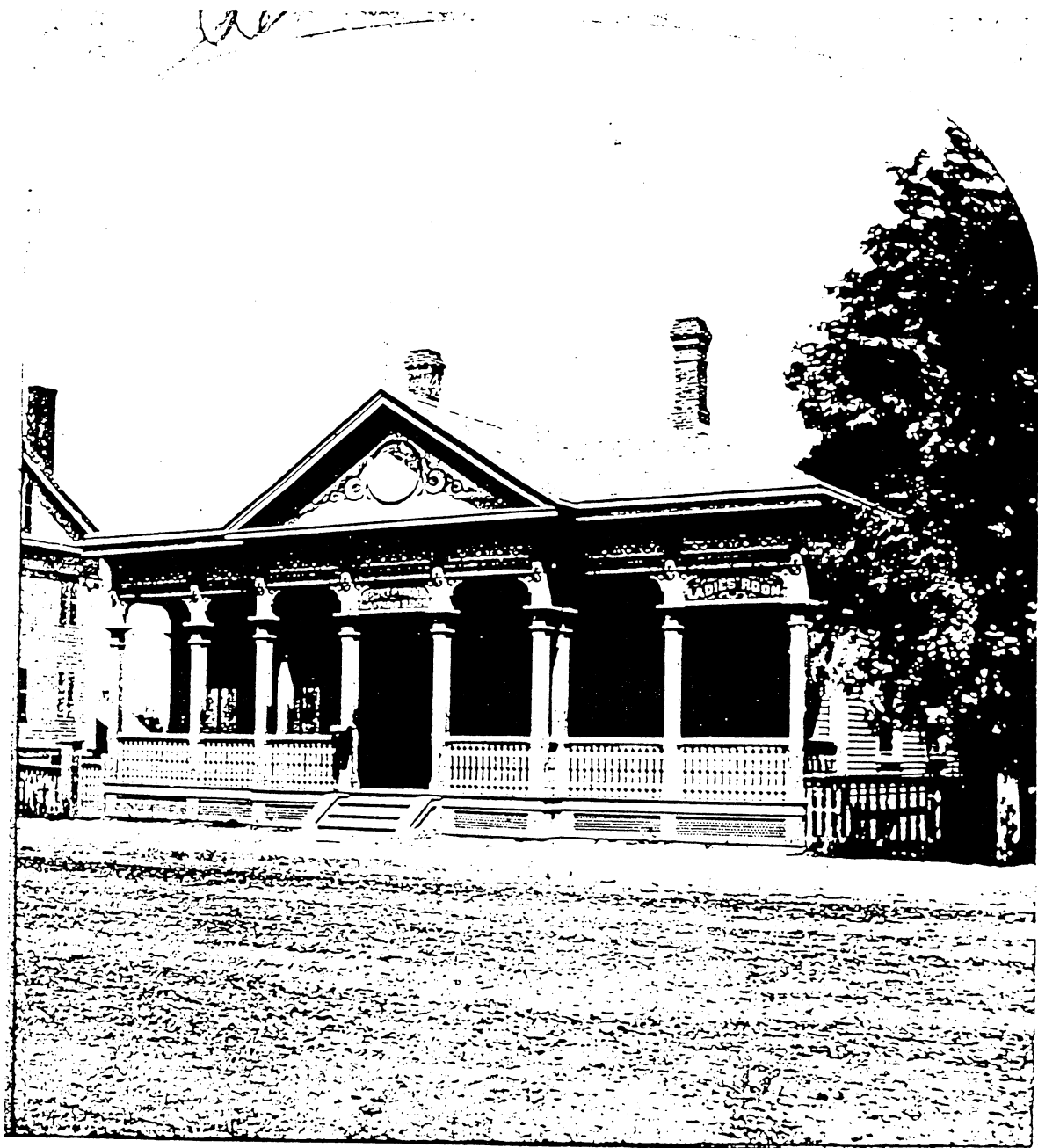
Cambridge. Historical Commission. Survey files for 457-587 Mount Auburn Street, Aberdeen Avenue, Brattle Circle, 22 Larch Road, Mount Auburn Cemetery.

## C. Historic Photographs



ca. 1871

583 Mt. Auburn Street  
Mt. Auburn Cemetery Reception House  
ca. 1871 SPNEA stereographic view



Figure

Reception House across from  
Main gate soon after its  
completion in 1869. Building  
is extant although no  
longer owned by Cemetery

## IV. Significance of the Property

### A. Historical Significance

The historical significance of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House lies primarily in its relationship to Mount Auburn Cemetery.

Mount Auburn Cemetery was established in reaction to the crowded, unhealthy city cemeteries that were common in the United States in the early 19th century. Cemeteries, treeless, barren and filled to capacity, were a contributing factor to epidemics of early America. Graves were commonly disturbed to provide room for new burials, and grave robbers stole fresh corpses for doctors to study anatomy. Cemeteries were unpleasant, noxious places which townspeople avoided. Reformed sensibilities, increased concern for public health, and new criteria for proper and respectful ways to treat the dead spurred burial reform in the early 19th century .

Jacob Bigelow, a Boston physician with an influential social circle, proposed a garden cemetery for Boston in 1825. In 1830, the picturesque piece of land called Sweet Auburn was procured for the purpose. The parcel was perfect for the rural garden cemetery, with diverse topography, dramatic views, ponds, marshes, valleys, hills and a varied plant life. The cemetery was modeled after Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, one of the first European garden cemeteries. The terrain of Sweet Auburn was allowed to dictate the design to create the picturesque ideal in vogue at the time.

The new cemetery opened in 1832, the first “garden cemetery” in the United States and one of the only park-like settings in the Boston area in the first half of the 19th century. Many purchased plots in the cemetery just to have full access for strolling and entertaining guests, as access initially required either ownership of a plot or the purchase of a ticket from the gatekeeper. The cemetery became a great attraction with omnibus service from Harvard Square to the cemetery gates by 1834.

By 1854, the road to the cemetery, previously known simply as the “road to Watertown”, was renamed Mount Auburn Street after the cemetery. The attraction of the cemetery was also the reason for the extension of a horse-car route from Boston to the cemetery in 1856. This horse-car route further augmented Cambridge’s development as a commuter suburb for Boston businessmen, who could ride to the city in half an hour.

While the popularity of the cemetery as a tourist attraction had somewhat abated by the 1860s, the small size of the gatehouse lodges prohibited their use as a reception area for visitors and cemetery plot-owners and the only other structures in the cemetery (Bigelow Chapel and a wellhouse/gazebo set just inside the gates) were similarly inappropriate or inadequate. The trustees proposed construction of a reception house and in 1870, the Reception House was built. The building provided a convenient waiting area for mourners and visitors, sold refreshments, and provided toilet facilities. Over the span of its ownership by the cemetery, the Reception House also served as a superintendent’s office.

In 1896, a stone administration building with some reception facilities was built in conjunction with Story Chapel. A second reception house was constructed in 1920 at the south side of the cemetery (demolished 1975) and in 1928, the old Reception House was sold.

In its original capacity as a cemetery reception house, the Reception House is historically significant because it reflects the importance of Mount Auburn Cemetery as the country's first garden cemetery and a major 19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston tourist attraction. It is also historically associated with the establishment of transportation routes that shaped the development of Cambridge as a residential suburb. The Reception House in its later commercial use remained associated with the cemetery. The Reception House illustrates an earlier period of historical development when this section of Cambridge was characterized by marginal commercial uses.

### B. Architectural Significance

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is architecturally significant as one of only two existing buildings in Cambridge designed by the architect Nathaniel J. Bradlee, as a good example of the Italianate style of architecture, and as the only known example of a cemetery reception house in existence in the United States.

Nathaniel Bradlee (1829-1888) was a prominent mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston architect, one of the last generation of architects who gained their skills through apprenticeship rather than schooling. At the age of 17, Bradlee began training as a draftsman in the office of George M. Dexter, an architect and engineer whose practice Bradlee inherited in 1856. In addition to his numerous commissions around Boston, Bradlee was also one of the nine founding members of the Boston Society of Architects in 1867. In 1872, Bradlee made Walter T. Winslow, a draftsman in his office, a partner. George H. Wetherell was promoted to partner in 1884. After Mr. Bradlee's death, the firm continued as Winslow, Wetherell & Bigelow (1888-1909).

Bradlee was known primarily for his commercial architecture, including such prominent Boston designs as the Hotel St. Cloud, the Baker Chocolate Factory, and the Jamaica Plain Unitarian Church. Many of Bradlee's buildings, built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century in Boston's commercial center, have since been demolished. (A particularly prominent building, the State Insane Asylum at Danvers, is currently slated for demolition.) Bradlee was also responsible for the moving of the massive Hotel Pelham in 1869, a great engineering feat which many of his contemporaries had thought impossible.

Bradlee was probably commissioned for the design of the Reception House due to the proximity of his office to the offices of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Corporation, next-door neighbors in Pemberton Square, Boston. The design of the Reception House is in keeping with his stylistic repertoire, which covered the range of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Bradlee's only other Cambridge building is Gray's Hall (1858) at Harvard University.

When it was built, the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House was a fine example of the Italianate style, common between 1850 and 1880. The finely chamfered square piazza posts, two-over-two window sash with footed frames, wide bracketed cornice, decorative friezeboard and low-pitched hipped roof, which were a part of the original design, are all characteristic of the Italianate

style. Though small, the clarity of proportions and the exquisite details give the building strength and presence. Although some of the original fabric of this structure has been obscured or removed, the basic form and many of the Italianate characteristics still exist. Many other details could be renewed or reinstated.

There is very little information about reception houses in cemetery architecture. It is likely that the Reception House is one of the first of its kind, because Mount Auburn Cemetery was the first garden cemetery in the country and initiated a new era of cemetery design and use. Older cemeteries usually had no buildings whatsoever. It is likely that in other cemeteries, as at Mount Auburn, structures built for the short-term use of visitors would have been somewhat impermanent by nature, and as a class there are no obvious categories of building type with which to compare the Mount Auburn Reception House. Perhaps the closest analogue to the Reception House are small railroad stations, which have not been preserved in large numbers.

Architecturally, then, the Mount Auburn Reception House is significant as a rare building type, as a rare example of a noted mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century architect, as a good example of the Italianate style of architecture, and for its associations with the architectural history of Mount Auburn Cemetery, noted as one of the country's most significant collections of funerary art, architecture, and design.

## V. Relationship to Criteria

### A. Article III, Chapter 2.78.180 a.

The enabling ordinance for landmarks 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 . . .

### B. Relationship of Property to Criteria

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House meets criterion (1) of the enabling ordinance for its important associations with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City as a visitor's shelter and administrative office for Mount Auburn Cemetery, a major 19<sup>th</sup>-century tourist attraction and nationally significant as the country's first garden cemetery. The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House meets criterion (2) for its historical and architectural significance in terms of its period and style as a unique building type, and for its associations with a famous architect, Nathaniel J. Bradlee.

## VI. Recommendations

### A. Article III, Chapter 2.78.140

The purpose of landmark designation is contained in the enabling ordinance, which is 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 . . . site 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; [and] to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such . . . structures . . .

### B. Preservation Options

The Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. National Register status protects the building from the adverse effects of federally licensed, permitted or funded projects and, through listing on the parallel State Register of Historic Places, from the adverse effects of state funded projects. The National and State registers provide limited protection from public projects through review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. However, the Massachusetts Historical Commission's power does not allow for review of privately funded projects, nor can the retention of particular property be mandated.

There are two options available to protect the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House from possible adverse effects of privately-initiated projects. The first option is City Council designation of the property as a landmark; the second is the owner's voluntary donation of a preservation restriction or easement to the Historical Commission or some other qualified body.

According to Article III, Chapter 2.78.190, designation of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House as a landmark would establish a process wherein "the Historical Commission . . . shall review all construction, demolition or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features, other than color," of the landmark. Chapter 2.78.210 states, "No building permit for alteration of an exterior architectural feature of a landmark . . . and no demolition permit for demolition or removal of a landmark . . . shall be issued by the City or any department thereof until the certificate required by this article has been issued by the Historical Commission . . ."

A certificate of appropriateness, hardship or non-applicability is issued by the Historical Commission depending on the nature of the alteration or construction proposed for the landmark. Applications for certificates of appropriateness or hardship are reviewed by the Commission at a public hearing, with 14 days notice provided to affected parties by legal notice and first class mail. The staff issues certificates of non-applicability administratively. The intent of the review process is to prevent "developments incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance or the distinctive character of the landmark" (2.78.220) The designation report may be drafted to allow specific development opportunities to take place.

Preservation easements may be donated to the Historical Commission or another qualified historic preservation organization under Chapter 184 of the Massachusetts General Laws. An easement is a

“non-possessory right to control what happens to buildings or land owned by others.” It is voluntarily conveyed by the property owner to an entity, such as the Historical Commission, which holds the right and enforces the terms. To be effective, the easement must protect the publicly visible features of the property from alteration without the Commission’s prior review. It may also be drafted to allow specific development opportunities to take place or to protect significant interior features.

Donation of an easement encourages private investment in significant buildings with no corresponding expenditure of public funds. Under Internal Revenue Service regulations, the value of an easement on a property listed on the National Register of Historic Places may be taken as a charitable deduction on personal income taxes. The value of an easement is calculated by taking the difference between “before” and “after” appraisals of the property. However, the rules for charitable contribution deductions for preservation easements are very technical. Any property owner considering the donation of an easement should consult a qualified tax consultant relative to the specific circumstances.

Preservation easements protect significant property in a similar manner to landmarking, that is, through review and approval of the Historical Commission and issuance of a certificate of appropriateness or hardship for any proposed repairs or alterations that affect protected portions of the property. Unlike landmarking, a preservation easement may have certain financial benefits for an owner and can address the protection of significant interior features.

### C. Staff Recommendation

It is the staff recommendation that the Historical Commission recommend the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House to the City Council for designation as a landmark. If the owner wished to pursue donation of an easement, consideration should be given to protecting significant aspects of the original interior, notably the floor plan of the building.

## VII. Standards and Criteria

### A. Introduction

Under Article III, the Historical Commission is charged with reviewing any construction, demolition or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features (other than color) of a landmark. This 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 following in paragraphs B and C of this section provide specific guidelines for the treatment of the landmark described in this report.

### B. General Standards and Criteria

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

1. Significant historic and architectural features of the landmark shall be preserved.
2. Changes and additions to the landmark, which have taken place over time, are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have acquired significance in their own right and, if so, that significance should be recognized and respected.
3. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced.
4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.
5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture, and appearance. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.
6. The surface cleaning of a landmark shall be done by the gentlest possible means. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that damage exterior architectural features shall not be used.
7. New additions shall not destroy significant exterior architectural features and shall not be incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinct character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.
8. New additions should be done in a way that if they were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the landmark should be unimpaired.

### C. Statement of Standards

#### Site

- a. Consider proposals for more intensive use of the site through appropriately-scaled and appropriately-detailed new construction behind the Reception House.
- b. Retain three major elevations (east and west elevations, south façade) in original form and design.

- c. Consider proposals for upgrading driveway and parking layout and materials, provided visual impacts on the Reception House are minimized.

#### Current Conditions

- a. Encourage development of a master plan for restoration, renovation and maintenance of the Reception House, including removal of stucco and reinstatement of exterior materials, including clapboards and exterior trim details as shown in 1871 SPNEA stereographic view.
- b. Retain or reinstate original window and door locations, with preference for re-opening boarded-over windows.
- c. Consider removal of brick vault addition at rear and other later additions, including monument crane and lightbox signage.
- d. Consider proposals for improving handicapped access, perhaps through ramping along the driveway side.

#### Adaptive Use

- a. Consider allowing development of basement area, perhaps with excavation at the back porch area to provide light and access.
- b. Avoid placement of additional windows in side and façade elevations.
- c. Encourage retention of interior features, primarily floorplan, and any significant early features revealed through further research.
- d. Encourage documentation (either by Historical Commission staff or other qualified professional/s) of exterior and interior conditions and finishes before any removal takes place.

## VIII. Proposed Order

### ORDERED:

That the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House, 583 Mount Auburn Street, be designated as a protected landmark pursuant to Chapter 2.78, Article III, Section 2.78.180 of the Code of the City of Cambridge, as recommended by vote of the Cambridge Historical Commission on February 6, 2003. The premises so designated are defined as parcel 9 of assessor's map 251 and recorded in book 19379, page 472 of the South Middlesex Registry of Deeds.

This designation is justified by the significant associations of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House (583 Mount Auburn Street), which is historically significant as a part of the Mount Auburn Cemetery, the first garden cemetery in the United States, which constructed and owned the Italianate building until 1929. The Reception House served to accommodate visitors to the cemetery, a nationally-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century tourist attraction. Architecturally, the Mount Auburn Reception House is significant as one of only two existing buildings in Cambridge by Nathaniel J. Bradlee, a prominent Boston architect. As a building type, the reception house is also a rare, and perhaps unique, structure; it is doubtful that any other cemeteries in the U.S. ever constructed structures specifically for the purpose of accommodating visitors to their grounds.

The effect of this designation shall be that no construction activity can take place within the designated area, and no action can be taken affecting the appearance of 583 Mount Auburn Street, that would in either case be visible from a public way, without review by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Non-Applicability, as the case may be. In making determinations, the Commission shall be guided by the terms of the landmark designation report, and by Section VII, Standards and Criteria, of the landmark designation report, and by the applicable sections of Article III, Chapter 2.78.140-270 of the Cambridge City Code.



5.

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE • EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

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*Robert W. Healy, City Manager*      *Richard C. Rossi, Deputy City Manager*

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March 17, 2003

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached for your consideration the Final Study Report for Designating the Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception House at 583 Mount Auburn Street, as a protected landmark.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy  
City Manager

RWH/mec

S-84

**Consent Agenda #5**

Final Study Report for Designating the  
Mount Auburn Cemetery Reception  
House at 583 Mount Auburn Street as  
a protected landmark.

**In City Council March 17, 2003**

**RECOMMEDATION  
ADOPTED.**