

WHAT IS THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION ?



THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION is a Cambridge City agency set up by City Council ordinance in 1963 to research and oversee Cambridge's resource of historic properties, and to carry out general public education concerning Cambridge history and the Commission's activities.

The ordinance authorizes the Commission to perform two types of activities. As public education, the ordinance specifies the publication of historical brochures; the construction of a model of Cambridge as it existed in 1776; the establishment of a historic site marker program; and the advising of owners of historic properties in Cambridge on matters of preservation. As a preservation planning agency, the Commission is authorized to establish and keep a complete listing of Cambridge buildings, based on an extensive architectural inventory; to establish and administer Historic Districts; to work with appropriate City departments and agencies in matters involving historic sites and buildings; and to consult and collaborate with other public and private preservation organizations with respect to Cambridge's historic buildings and properties.

As allowed by law, the Commission is made up of professionals from several fields, including three architects, one landscape architect, one lawyer, and one realtor. The Director of the Cambridge Public Library also sits on the Commission; the balance of the members are at-large and reside in Donnelly Field, Cambridgeport, and North Cambridge.

IN THE PAST TEN YEARS the Historical Commission has concentrated on carrying out an exhaustive architectural inventory of Cambridge, the results of which are open to the public. Every building, as well as special localities within Cambridge, is filed by address; the file contains the survey sheet listing the date of the building if known and its architectural style, along with surveyors' comments. Files of notable buildings or sites also include photographs, deed research, and any other related research.

This architectural inventory data has had two important benefits. It has been useful in dealing with constant calls from propertyowners with questions concerning their building, from restoration problems to simple curiosity. It also acts as a written and visual record for the Commission's review of applications from Historic District propertyowners who want to make alterations on their properties.

The data also acts as source material for the Commission's preservation planning activities. Whether nominating a property to the National Register of Historic Places or planning a Historic District in a lesser-known neighborhood of Cambridge, the survey sheet provides the essential information on dates and styles; photographs offer the staff an important preliminary view of the area.

One recent event shows the value of the files. A propertyowner in North Cambridge called the Commission for advice on paint color for the house he recently bought; the staff, as usual, asked his address and pulled out the file for that house. The house, it was discovered, had been thoroughly researched as an important house dating from the Revolution. The owner had not known this, and became interested. A visit by Commission historian and staff revealed that the house still possesses most of its 18th-century features, including doors, windows, and framing, underneath a coat of asphalt shingles. As a result of the owner's call to the Commission and the file which showed the house to be historically valuable, plans are being made to nominate the house to the National Register of Historic Places. This will enable the blue-collar owner to apply for grant money to remove the asphalt shingles and make other repairs. As the Commission becomes better-known in the City in its advisory role, we expect to receive more such calls and inquiries from the public.

The files tie in directly with the Commission's major publishing effort, The Architectural Survey of Cambridge. Four volumes - East Cambridge, Mid-Cambridge, Old Cambridge, and Cambridgeport - have been published and are for sale in bookstores or from the Commission. The fifth and final volume on Northwest Cambridge, will be completed this summer. It contains substantive information on the claypits and brickyards of that area and on the Irish settlement called "Dublin" of the last century, as well as facts and lore about other areas of that neighborhood. The Commission office keeps the original artwork and maps used in the volumes; these are available for study at the Commission office.

Other publications include Robert Bell Rettig's Guide to Cambridge Architecture: Ten Walking Tours; as well as a series of historical brochures, of which two ("Old Cambridge" and "Cambridge During the Revolution") have been printed. Requests for the brochures come consistently from all parts of the U.S., from individuals and groups alike. This spring, the Commission has distributed a brochure entitled "Paint Colors for your 19th century house." It ties in with RCCC's Paint Project and has already received numerous inquiries and requests for more.

FOUR HISTORIC DISTRICTS have been administered in the past ten years by the Commission, as part of its planning program. Plans are now in progress to consolidate these four into one large district, the "Old Cambridge Historic District," extending from Old Harvard Yard to Brattle Street.

Historic districting is perhaps the single most important preservation activity of the Commission. Through a historic district, entire streets and neighborhoods may be offered special protection.

against unwanted alterations to structures within that area -- from new construction to demolition. The regulations may vary from district to district -- in less wealthy districts, the regulations will be looser than in, for example, the Old Cambridge Historic District, where even exterior paint color comes under review. The primary purpose of a historic district is not so much to create a "stage set" of period architecture, but to preserve a living piece of the city and protect it against destructive change by protecting its architecture and streetscapes.

Though the Commission processes applications from property owners who wish to make alterations on their properties, the District itself is set up with the full understanding and agreement of the neighborhood -- as such it is self-policing. The regulatory process ensures that any proposed alteration is compatible with its site and surroundings. In this way the District can stabilize a street or an entire neighborhood and thus must be considered a potent planning tool.

CLOSE COLLABORATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS is basic to Commission operations. The Commission is currently working closely with the Community Development Department to develop a preservation-oriented component in the community plan for East Cambridge.

In the coming fiscal year, the Commission will be taking a new role in the housing rehab programs which exist in Cambridge. The Commission will collaborate with Homeowners Rehab, RCCC, and Just-A-Start in reviewing rehab fund applications from owners with buildings of architectural or historical note, and will make recommendations to the agencies for special preservation-oriented grants to be given to these owners. This is an important new step in the work of the Commission, and signifies another way in which historic preservation planning can help make Cambridge a better place to live.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES nominations also provide another way of preserving historic sites in Cambridge. National Register status has two benefits: it requires a review process for any project using Federal money or done by a Federal agency for its impact on a historic resource; and it makes the owner of such a property eligible to apply for Federal grant money for the purpose of restoring and/or preserving the property. The Historical Commission has been charged by the Mass. Historical Commission with the responsibility for receiving, processing, and recommending on these grant applications. Massachusetts annually receives a significant amount of money for Register properties; Cambridge, with its wealth of historically and architecturally significant properties, could receive much more. One task of the Commission in the future is to intensify its National Register program and to guide owners in applying for these grants.

SPECIAL PROJECTS, including those authorized by the ordinance, are underway and have been timed to coincide with the Bicentennial. Of these, the Model of Cambridge in 1776 and its accompanying slide show, "Reflections on Cambridge," have been funded entirely by state and matching private grants. The other projects are funded by a combination of matching state and block grant funds, or with old Capital Improvements monies from the City.

Many of these projects will be viewed by the thousands of tourists who will come to Cambridge this year. The Old Burying Ground, site of graves of early patriots and patricians and Harvard presidents, has undergone a facelifting under the auspices of the Commission. The first of a series of educational History Station installations has been inaugurated in East Cambridge. Fort Washington in Cambridgeport, a little-known original Revolutionary War earthworks, is slated for restoration to its former 1858 role as a public urban park. Now on the industrial fringe, this National Register site is in very bad repair.

ON THE DRAWING BOARDS

The first volume of the Architectural Survey, dealing with East Cambridge is now out of print; it will be expanded and updated. To supplement the "Reflections on Cambridge" slide show, which deals with the early general history of colonial Cambridge and the city's subsequent development, the Commission plans to produce a slide show on Black history in Cambridge, in conjunction with Boston's Museum of Afro-American History.

The Commission also intends to expand its role as a planning force in Cambridge. It is presently considering the establishment of two new Historic Districts, one in East Cambridge and one in Cambridgeport. Both of these areas have a rich architectural and historical heritage and interest has been expressed in both neighborhoods for the establishment of a Historic District. Historic District activity, in conjunction with an active National Register nomination program, could directly complement the work of the City, the Planning Board, and the host of neighborhood organizations struggling to relieve some of the pressures of land use, traffic, and housing shortages in the City.

Preservation -- historic or architectural -- could be an important planning tool for Cambridge. The Historical Commission has statutory authority to conduct its preservation activities; and it has in the past acted as an important resource to the public, in terms of technical assistance, information, advice, and education. It hopes not only to continue in this parth, but to reach out more directly to the community with the skills and planning potential particular to historic preservation.

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