

RECEIVED  
OFFICE OF CITY CLERK

SEP 11 3 13 PM '85

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Landmark Designation Report

Houghton Beech Tree, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue

Cambridge Historical Commission  
August 15, 1985

Landmark Designation Report

Houghton Beech Tree, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue

I. Location

The Houghton Beech Tree is located at 1000 Massachusetts Avenue between Harvard and Central Squares on parcel 7, assessors plan 121. This parcel totals 21,648 square feet, and has 100 feet of frontage on Massachusetts Avenue, 95 feet on Green Street, and depth of 227 feet. The lot slopes steeply from Massachusetts Avenue to Green Street, with a difference in elevation of twenty-five feet, and is presently paved for parking. The tree is located about two feet from the west property line and about thirty feet south of Massachusetts Avenue.

The adjoining lots on the east have recently been redeveloped with a four-story office building that extends from Bay Street to the east property line of parcel 7; a current proposal would extend this building onto parcel 7 and approach but not require removal of the Houghton Beech. Adjoining the tree on the west is The Cantabridgia at 1010 Massachusetts Avenue, a six-story apartment building constructed in 1899. Across the Avenue is the Orson Welles Theater complex, an apartment building, and a one-story storefront. Once a prestigious residential street, this section of Massachusetts Avenue is now best characterized as in transition from a low density commercial strip to an area of mid-rise office buildings.

## II. Description

The Houghton Beech is a mature tree of the species Fagus sylvatica or European beech. It is approximately eighty feet high and measures 3.2 feet in diameter at a height of four feet six inches above the ground. Estimates of its age range from 100 to 140 years old. It has been evaluated by one professional arborist as being in fair to good condition, and by another as being in good health.

The European Beech generally is valued for its "strong, dense form and enormous spread and height". The smooth, grey bark contrasts attractively with the bronze leaves, which form dense shade. The tree may grow to a height of 100 feet and a spread of 70 feet, and have a life expectancy of 300 years or more. A special characteristic of this species is the closeness of the roots to the surface. This makes it almost impossible to grow anything below a beech tree, but also makes it easy to move even as a mature tree. However, beeches cannot stand compaction of the soil or even moderate fill over the root system; extraordinary care is thus required to protect a beech tree during and after a construction project.

## III. History of the Property

The property at 1000 Massachusetts Avenue was developed in 1836, when the Middlesex High School was constructed on the site. The building, a porticoed Greek Revival structure, was

later occupied by the Hopkins Classical School. In 1857, the school buildings having been removed, the property was conveyed to Henry O. Houghton, who immediately constructed a mansion in the Second Empire style designed by Calvin Ryder. After Houghton's death in 1895 the house was occupied by his daughters, and, in 1917, use of the building was given to The Avon Home as a residence for orphans. The Avon Home occupied the building until 1945, and after many years of office use it was torn down in about 1976. Since that time the premises have been used as a public parking lot. The property is now held in common with adjoining parcels at 974 and 988 Massachusetts Avenue, which have been developed with an office building constructed in 1982. The final stage of construction has been designed, but will not be undertaken until market conditions warrant.

#### IV. Significance

The Houghton Beech is significant as an example of a desirable specimen tree and for its associations with the Houghton family. European Beeches are by definition not native to this country and are not commonly found as volunteers; they have been regarded as important landscape trees since their introduction and are generally intentionally planted to enhance the landscape. They are highly distinctive in appearance and are widely regarded as a tree of exceptional value.

Henry Houghton was one of Cambridge's most important citizens during the nineteenth century. Founder of the Riverside

Press and the Houghton Mifflin firm of publishers, Houghton was an industrialist who also wielded great influence in literary circles, and was Mayor of Cambridge in 1872. His house, built in 1856, was significant as one of the earliest residential examples of the Second Empire style in the Boston area. The grounds included a large carriage house, which was demolished in 1926. No views of the original landscaping have been found.

#### V. Threats to the Proposed Landmark

The properties that include the Houghton Beech have been under development since the late 1970s. The initial stage, a four-story office structure, was completed by Spaulding & Slye in 1983, and provisions were made by the architects, Symmes, Maini & McKee, for an extension to be built to the west. The developer does not intend to develop the site immediately, but wishes to have all the elements of a development plan in place so that construction can begin at any time.

The proposed extension is a six-story structure that will join the existing building on the west. The footprint of the building will resemble a dumbbell shape, in that the east bays that now approach Massachusetts Avenue will be balanced by a similar projection on the west, adjacent to the tree, and the receding entrance bays will be in the center of the combined facade.

As presently planned, the foundation will be within sixteen feet of the tree trunk. While the northwest corner of the

building is notched back nine feet from the west wall and twenty-eight feet from the north wall, the setback does not increase the distance from the foundation to the tree. The fifth and sixth stories are also set back from the north and west facades, but the corner of the building closest to the tree is still only sixteen feet from the trunk for the full six-story height of the structure. A concrete exit ramp will run along the north wall all the way to Massachusetts Avenue, passing within three or four feet of the tree.

The impact of a new building placed adjacent to a mature tree is felt strongest during construction through the impact on the root system and from pruning. European Beech trees are notably susceptible to damage from compaction of the soil around the roots and from backfill operations; the addition of only two or three inches of soil over the roots is said to cause long-term damage. During construction, at least a quarter and perhaps a third of the root system would be severed, and with construction of a concrete exit ramp, at least fifty percent of the root system would be affected. In addition, approximately twenty percent of the crown on the east side of the tree would be removed.

The developer has submitted reports from two arborists who were requested to evaluate the construction plans and suggest mitigation measures. One estimated that if a program of careful pruning, feeding, irrigation and misting were undertaken, the tree had a seventy-five percent chance of surviving five years

and a sixty percent chance of lasting ten years. Alternatively, the developer has offered to relocate the tree to the park on the Green Street side of the site, citing successful moves of mature beech trees in Washington, D.C., and in Boston. No information has been submitted concerning the long-term success of such moves.

#### VI. Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The proposal to designate the Houghton Beech as a landmark raises new issues for the Commission and requires careful interpretation of the meaning and intent of Ordinance 1002. In addition, the Commission must consider the geographical extent of any landmark designation, as well as the degree to which future maintenance of the tree would be regulated.

Section (4) of Ordinance 1002 establishes criteria for landmark designation. It states that the Commission ". . . may recommend for designation as a landmark any property . . . being or containing a place, structure, feature or object which it determines to be either (a) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the city or the Commonwealth, or (b) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction, or association with a famous builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures. . . ."

Notwithstanding the primary intent of the ordinance, which was to allow designation of man-made structures considered

worthy of preservation, the language, as it describes a "feature or object", need not be stretched far to include a tree, which is certainly an object and, in this case, demonstrably was planted purposefully. The Houghton Beech can also be said to be "importantly associated" with an historic person. Criteria (b) clearly is meant to refer to structures.

The Commission must also consider the extent of the designation. If the entire property is designated, the Commission must evaluate the proposed new extension and any future alteration to it. This must be done, according to Section (8) of the Ordinance, with consideration of 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 area. In the case of new construction or additions to existing structures, a commission shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity, and a commission may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provisions of the zoning ordinance. . . ."

The appropriateness of the new addition at 1000 Massachusetts Avenue may not be as important as the impact it may have on the continued viability of the tree. Notwithstanding

the language of Section (8), the intent of any designation that includes the new structure should be to protect the tree from unnecessary violence, not to effect changes in the superficial appearance of the building. The last paragraph of Section (8) may be applicable: "A commission may not make any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of preventing developments incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinctive character of the landmark. . . ." Causing the death or impairment of the tree through adjacent new construction might be construed to be an incongruous development.

Continued maintenance of the tree is an additional issue. Neglect of the tree during and after construction could easily kill it, even if designated a landmark. The arborists consulted by the developer have recommended specific procedures to protect the tree during construction and have recommended an annual maintenance program of feeding and irrigation. Such recommendations cannot easily be incorporated into the designation and enforcement may be problematical if the owner is unwilling. Finally, tree surgery in the future might logically be subject to the certificate process, and the Commission would have to ensure that a professional arborist's advice is available.

#### VII. Recommendation

Preservation of the Houghton Beech is a desirable objective that may best be accomplished by other means than landmark designation, although this action could be held in reserve

if negotiation is not successful. The purpose of designation would be the long-term preservation of the tree, to which the most critical threat is the construction of 1000 Massachusetts Avenue. If the developer, the petitioners, and the city can agree on measures that will preserve the tree before construction begins, landmark designation may not be necessary. If this cannot be accomplished, landmark designation and review of the plans for the new building may be required.

RECEIVED BY  
OFFICE OF CITY CLERK

SEP 11 3 13 PM '85

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Proposed Landmark Designation  
for the  
Hotel Saxon, 10 Mount Auburn Street

Cambridge Historical Commission  
August 15, 1985

Proposed Landmark Designation for the Hotel Saxon,  
10 Mount Auburn Street

I. Location and Setting

The Hotel Saxon, a three story wood frame residential structure, is located at 10 Mount Auburn Street on parcel 97, assessor's plan 132. The 7,759 square foot lot contains two structures, 8½ and 10 Mount Auburn Street, and has approximately 85 feet of frontage on Mount Auburn Street and 114 feet on Banks Street. The building at 8½ Mount Auburn Street, a one-story commercial structure, has not been proposed for landmark designation.

Mount Auburn Street between Massachusetts Avenue and Linden Street was laid out in 1803, bypassing Harvard Square. It was not part of the seventeenth century street grid, and no houses were built between Mount Auburn Street and the river in this vicinity until after 1854, the ground being marshy and subject to flooding. By 1873, however, the neighborhood was quite densely built up with small workers' cottages occupied mainly by Irish laborers. The general prosperity in Harvard Square in the early 1890s was reflected in this neighborhood by the construction of the Hotel Saxon at 10 Mount Auburn Street and the adjoining private dormitory for Harvard students at 12 Mount Auburn, both in 1892. Except for the recent construction of office and residential structures on Massachusetts Avenue, this section has

seen little development since the turn of the century. Banks Street remains the entrance to a modest, low density, residential neighborhood off Mount Auburn Street, the main thoroughfare, and 10 and 12 Mount Auburn Street are the somewhat more modern and imposing gateposts.

## II. Description

The Hotel Saxon, a three story, six flat wood frame apartment building in the Queen Anne style, was constructed in 1892; the architect is unknown. The building is irregular in plan to conform to the odd shape of the lot on the corner on Banks Street. It contained two apartments on each floor, ranging in size from four to six rooms.

On the exterior, alternating bands of clapboards and shingles surround the building, defining the floor levels and emphasizing the projecting bays and towers. The three principal facades are capped by an abbreviated mansard that further emphasizes the complexity of the composition. The unusual corner towers provide the main decorative focus of the building. Rising a full three stories, the northwest tower projects so far from the plane of the building that it is almost three-quarters of a circle in plan. At the roof level the tower terminates in a conical roof in which a six foot high shingled cone with a flared and bracketed cornice perches whimsically above the mansard. A flagpole originally rose an additional 10 feet from the cone. This unusual double roof treatment is repeated above

the octagonal bay at the opposite corner of the Mount Auburn Street facade. Another unusual feature of the facade is the placement of decorative brackets. Instead of using brackets as expected on the main cornice of the building, that cornice is plain, and closely spaced brackets instead ornament the cornices of the upper roofs of the tower and bay.

A large flat bay occupies the facade between the corner towers. The entrance originally consisted of two doors recessed beneath this bay, which was supported by two decorative brackets at the level of the second floor. Balconies with bandsawn balusters originally connected the central bay with the corner towers. When the first floor was remodelled for commercial use in the 1960s, the balconies along with the brackets and original doors were removed. All the first floor windows along Mount Auburn and Banks Streets were enlarged and the original sashes were replaced with large lights of glass. In a subsequent remodelling to capture additional retail space, the basement under the corner tower was excavated and the foundation removed; the tower is now supported by a pipe column. These alterations have had relatively little effect on the building's overall appearance, and are best understood by comparison of the photographs from 1965 and 1972 that are attached.

### III. History of the Property

The property at the corner of Banks and Mount Auburn Streets remained undeveloped for only a short time when the

neighborhood between Mount Auburn and the river was rapidly built up after the Civil War.

The one-story frame building at 8½ Mount Auburn Street first appeared on the Cambridge tax records in 1871 as "1 store, new" assessed to James R. Hill, a hostler who lived nearby at 9 Flagg Street. Little of its original use as a store is known, but the clapboarded building follows a typical nineteenth century store form with full projecting wooden cornice and a recessed center entrance flanked by large display windows. By 1878 George Boyson's grocery and provision store occupied the building. Boyson was a provision dealer who lived in Cambridgeport and ran a grocery business at 403 Main Street from 1865 until he moved his operations to Mount Auburn Street in 1878. In 1885 he bought the lot at the corner of Banks Street, including 84 feet along Mt. Auburn Street, on which the buildings at 8½ and 10 now stand. By 1887 Boyson was running both a grocery and provision store at 8½ Mount Auburn Street and publishing a periodical in Cambridgeport; during this time he was living at 10 Mount Auburn Street in a house which the present building replaced. The store at 8½ was expanded in 1892 and continued in use as a grocery store in the Boyson family until the end of the century.

In 1892 George Boyson erected the three-story apartment building at 10 Mount Auburn Street next to his grocery business. Boyson died shortly after the turn of the century and the business continued for a few years under the supervision of his son.

The original house at 10 Mount Auburn Street was probably a side hall, 2½ story house with the gable end to the street; whether it was moved or destroyed is unknown, but in 1892 it would have been barely twenty years old. The building that George Boyson began to build in July of that year was described in The Cambridge Tribune as a "well-appointed three story wooden apartment house . . . or hotel as it will be called . . . (containing) nearly all the modern improvements of this type of building." This type of structure soon evolved into the familiar three-decker, but in 1892 the concept of living in flats in a multi-story building was still novel. So-called French flats were first introduced in Boston in the 1850s, and required some heavy promotion to overcome the traditional preference of householders to occupy an entire house, even if it was an attached row house; sharing a common entrance, much less a floor, with others was considered undesirable. As land values increased and the balloon frame construction technique gained greater currency, large wooden apartment structures were developed. To overcome the popular prejudice against them, the earliest were called "hotels" to convey an association with the French flat concept, which was of a residential hotel rather than one for transients. The Hotel Saxon, as Boyson's new building was called, had one characteristic feature of this evolving building type, a full kitchen and dining room in the basement. Tenants may have been able to arrange for boarding privileges with the

the proprietor, although each apartment or "tenement" was also supplied with hot and cold water, gas, set tubs, and a range for individual cooking.

The building continued in residential use until the 1970s, when a gradual conversion to retail and commercial use began. First the ground floor apartments and then the basement were converted to retail space, while offices gradually occupied the upstairs apartments. The Banks Street neighborhood, once known as Kerry's Corner, remained residential, although some demolition and clearance for parking lots and dormitory construction hastened social change there. Beginning in the 1970s, Massachusetts Avenue, in the vicinity of Quincy Square, experienced construction of several large residential and commercial structures, but, in general, the section of Mount Auburn Street from Putnam Avenue to De Wolfe Street retains its nineteenth and early twentieth century character and density.

#### IV. Significance

##### A. Historical Significance

The Hotel Saxon apparently has never been associated with any important events or significant individuals. Rather, its historical significance derives from its reflection of the entrepreneurial spirit of the small proprietor in the period after the Civil War and from its representation of the social and economic development of Cambridge in that period.

## B. Architectural Significance

The architectural significance of the Hotel Saxon lies in its associations with the early development of wood frame apartment buildings, and in its idiosyncratic application of Queen Anne stylistic features to this relatively new housing type. Stylistically, the greatest difficulty with the new buildings containing three or more flats was their great mass, and designers went to some lengths to obscure or disguise this. In the case of the Hotel Saxon, the designer focussed attention on the Mount Auburn Street facade, using an assymetrical arrangement of turrets and bays with strongly defined articulation. The Banks Street facade, on the other hand, is relieved only by the vestigial mansard and the alternating bands of shingles and clapboards. Nonetheless, the building represents striking ingenuity in the application of domestic architectural details to make such great mass visually acceptable. In this respect, it is singular if not unique in Cambridge.

The building also gains significance from its siting in the neighborhood. With its most imposing facade facing the main thoroughfare, the Hotel Saxon serves as both a gateway and a shield for the lower density neighborhood behind it, and is a visual anchor for the Banks Street neighborhood.

## V. Impact Assessment of Proposed Demolition

The proposed demolition of the Hotel Saxon represents a serious threat to the integrity and character of the Banks Street neighborhood. The building at 10 Mount Auburn Street is an architectural highlight of the neighborhood, and occupies a critical site at the juncture of the residential area and intense commercial uses at Putnam Square. Substitution of a larger masonry structure for this three-story, wooden, richly detailed landmark would irretrievably alter the character of the neighborhood, by bringing larger scale construction further into an already fragile environment, and introducing this scale to Banks Street.

Currently, Banks Street is the most protected of the neighborhood's streets, with nineteenth century houses even terminating the view across Mount Auburn Street. The height and mass of 10 Mount Auburn represent the greatest magnitude that can be accommodated by the neighborhood. Other structures in the area reach three stories, including a scattering of three-deckers, but the overall scale of the neighborhood is much smaller, with two-story cottages and small 2½ story and Mansard-roofed houses dominating the streets. The area has a comfortable, open feeling, with irregular lot sizes and house spacing creating views through the neighborhood and across Putnam Avenue to similar houses lining Green Street.

Within the neighborhood itself, a pleasant character is created by the collection of late Victorian housing, more distinguished by carefully appropriate paint colors than by architectural detail. For the most part, these are background buildings whose value rests in their cumulative effect and in a reflection of ornamental detail from the handful of buildings where stylistic expression exceeds a roof form or an entrance canopy.

While the architectural detail of 10 Mount Auburn Street appears as a veneer on a standard residential form, it is nonetheless an outstanding example of the Queen Anne style in the context of its neighborhood. The subtle references to Queen Anne style that permeate the area would be less comprehensible, if not invisible, without the presence of 10 Mount Auburn. The absence of 10 Mount Auburn could easily lead to further erosion of neighborhood character, since the importance of such detail fades when removed from a meaningful context.

In the context of Mount Auburn Street, number 10 plays an equally significant role. Currently, the south side of the street from De Wolf to Banks consists of late nineteenth century wood houses. Opposite Banks Street is a row of five similar buildings, now used as offices but retaining a residential character. The southeast corner of Banks and Mount Auburn, where 10 Mount Auburn now stands, is a stabilizing connector of these two stretches of domestic scale along the street. Combined,

they create an important interval between the Gold Coast and Putnam Square that serves as the public face of the Banks/Athens neighborhood, and protects it from deteriorating into a vestigial pocket standing in the way of progress.

The Banks/Athens neighborhood retains a cohesive identity and stands as an important reminder of the close relationship of residential and commercial areas within Harvard Square. Like the recently designated Neighborhood Conservation District in the Half Crown Lot at the other end of Mount Auburn Street, this area requires decisive support for its traditional identity, to protect against engulfing development. The building at 10 Mount Auburn Street is critically important to the continued integrity of the neighborhood, and should be retained by itself or incorporated in an appropriate redevelopment of the site.

#### VI. Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The criteria for landmark designation contained in Section 4 of Ordinance 1002 requires that the Commission determine that a structure be

. . . either (a) 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 (b) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction, or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures. . . .

The Hotel Saxon most clearly approaches the criteria for landmark designation in the area of its associations with the broad architectural, economic, and social history of the City and for the period and style of its architecture. In making its determination, the Commission must find the building to be importantly associated with the history of the city or architecturally significant by itself or in the context of its surroundings.

#### VII. Recommendation

The Hotel Saxon, while important architecturally and possessing certain associations with the history of the city, gains its greatest significance when viewed in the context of its surroundings and should thus be considered as a key building in a possible neighborhood conservation district encompassing Athens, Banks, Cowperthwaite, Grant, and Flagg Streets. While landmark designation should not be withheld from any structure because of its vernacular architecture or associations with only the broader patterns of Cambridge history, a structure such as the Hotel Saxon that is only one of numerous buildings in its vicinity threatened with eventual demolition should best be protected along with its neighborhood.

The Banks Street or Kelley's Corner neighborhood is, like the Half Crown Neighborhood Conservation District west of Harvard Square, plainly in the path of commercial and institutional expansion. While partially protected by zoning and rent

control, the neighborhood has no method at hand to fully protect itself against demolition, inappropriate redevelopment, and alteration of existing buildings. Establishment of a neighborhood conservation district, which could be initiated by the Commission but is more appropriately brought about by neighborhood action, is the only method by which the neighborhood can grapple with the full impact of redevelopment proposals such as the one proposed for the Hotel Saxon. Landmark designation would preserve the building itself, but development of a major structure on adjoining lots would not be regulated. The major threat to the Banks Street neighborhood is not the loss of one building but the rapid erosion of neighborhood scale and character by inappropriate development. Only a neighborhood conservation district can protect against this certain eventuality.



**CITY OF CAMBRIDGE**  
OFFICE OF CITY CLERK  
**INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE**  
SEP 11 5 51 PM '85  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

**To** Paul Healy, City Clerk

**Date** September 10, 1985

**From** Charles M. Sullivan

**Reference**

**Subject** Landmark Designation Reports

As required by Section 4 of Ordinance 1002, I am transmitting two Landmark Designation Reports that will be considered by the Historical Commission at a public hearing on Thursday, October 3 at 4:00 P.M. in the third floor conference room at the City Hall Annex.

The properties in question are the Hotel Saxon at 10 Mount Auburn Street and the Houghton Beech Tree at 1000 Massachusetts Avenue. In both cases, landmark designation was initiated by petition of ten registered voters. At the conclusion of the public hearing, the Commission will determine what recommendation to make to the City Council in each case.

enclosures

6. S- 662

Comm. received from Charles M. Sullivan,  
Historical Commission, transmitting two  
Landmark Designation Reports.

In City Council,

September 16, 1985

9/16/85

Placed on File