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IN THIS ISSUE

- When Memorial Drive Had a Spectacular Look
By Michael Kenney 1
- Electrical Work Sparks Restoration
By Gavin W. Kleespies 2
- CHS Welcomes New Assistant Director Cynthia Brennan
- New CHS Councilor Frank Kramer
- Upcoming Events 3
- Interns and Projects 4-5
- Rent Control Papers
- Preservation Award: Low Cost and Creative
By Michael Kenney 5
- Society News Online
- What Did Cambridgeport Do to Washington Allston?
By Daphne Abeel 6
- CHS' Spring Benefit 7
- Mysterious Wallpaper Appears
- From the President
By Jinny Nathans Back Cover

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When Memorial Drive Had a Spectacular Look

By Michael Kenney

Head east on Memorial Drive, from the BU Bridge all the way in toward the Science Museum.

There was a time, quite a few years back, when on the left, facing the river, there were dramatic signs, one after another, giving an edge to Cambridge's industrial powerhouse district.

Today, just one remains, the sign at the Shell station at the end of Magazine Street. A popular landmark for over a half-century, it was designated as "spectacular" this year by the Cambridge Historical Commission.

In mid-June, that designation was awaiting approval by the City Council. A similar designation in 1996 was not approved by the Council.

Now, its lights dark because of wiring problems, the sign is not as spectacular as it once was, but it stands as a reminder of Cambridge's industrial history.

The well-known CITGO sign in Kenmore Square is still lighting up nightly, but gone from the Cambridge side of the Charles River are its well-remembered beacons.

Along Cambridge Parkway there were, among others, the Carter's Ink sign with its clock and,



The RCA and Whirlpool signs along Memorial Drive
(Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission)



The Shell sign from Memorial Drive, looking northeast
(Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission)

topping a row of massive industrial buildings, signs announcing the presence of Gordon, the knitwear maker, General Electric, and Parke-Davis.

There were also the RCA and Whirlpool signs at 610-620 Memorial Drive, the R. H. White Co. sign on its warehouse at the original Ford Motor Co. building at 640 Memorial Drive, and the Electronics Corporation of America sign at 1 Memorial Drive, with its logo of a lightning bolt transfixing the ECA initials.

Continued on page 4

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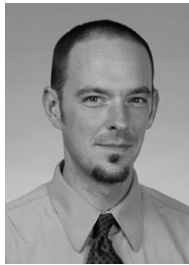
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From the Executive Director

Electrical Work Sparks Restoration

By Gavin W. Kleespies



The Cambridge Historical Society's Hooper-Lee-Nichols house has become a center of attention in the preservation world. And now, thanks to a generous donation

from the Cambridge Savings Bank, we will be able to document our discoveries and assemble an infrastructure that will allow us to continue to learn and innovate.

The excitement about the house was sparked by a large electrical upgrade and historic restoration project that the Society undertook after being awarded a CPA (Community Preservation Act) grant. The resulting disruption gave us the opportunity to conduct research into the early history of the building.

Working with Brian Powell of Building Conservation Associates, we undertook an in-depth paint analysis. Through looking at the number of paint layers and their colors, we have gained a much greater understanding of the sequence in which the house was constructed. For example, in the Bosphorus room there are two doors, a fireplace, and paneling covering the eastern wall. Looking at the number of paint layers on each of these, you can tell that the two doors, although dissimilar in design, were placed there at about the same time, but the paneling in between them was added later.

This development attracted the attention of architectural historians, who suggested other avenues of exploration to consider. Armed with this advice, we undertook some special studies of the building.

We opened some of the eighteenth-century paneling that covered the earlier constructions, and what we found answered some questions but raised many new ones.

Hoping to answer some of these new questions, we were able to do a small amount of dendrochronology (the study of the tree rings) in the timbers of our house. Although we are still awaiting the results, if we have the right type of lumber in the right condition, the samples will be able to tell us, not just the year a tree was cut down, but the season of the year in which it was cut.



Dan Miles of Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory taking a core sample at the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House

The use of these techniques to study the house has attracted some of the most highly regarded preservation professionals in the area, and their ongoing interest has provided us with a unique opportunity. We plan to capitalize on this with a publication that includes contributions from a number of experts, including

Charles Sullivan, Susan Maycock, and Sarah Burks of the Cambridge Historical Commission, Carl Nold and Sarah Zimmerman of Historic New England, Claire Dempsey, Brian Powell, and Tim Orwig, along with an interview with Jim Shea of the Longfellow National Historic Site and short pieces by restoration carpenter Jonathan Detwiler.



Dan Miles holding a core sample taken for dendro analysis

This publication and new design of the interior will be underwritten by the Cambridge Savings Bank. We look forward to unveiling it with the reopening of our museum space in December. The new display will showcase the history of

Cambridge and our community's past.

CHS' New Council Member, Frank Kramer

Frank was born in Cambridge in 1941. In 1962 he took over the leadership of the Harvard Book Store, which his father had founded in 1932 on Boylston Street in Harvard Square. During the next 46 years, his bookstore became a Harvard Square landmark and one of the leading independent bookstores in the United States. The



bookstore was sold in October 2008. In 2006 Frank, along with Simon Shapiro of Tag's Hardware, founded Cambridge Local First, an alliance of locally owned independent businesses that promote the benefits to the community of shopping locally. Frank is currently co-chairman of CLF, serves on the Board of Directors of the Harvard Square Business Association, and has been a member of the Harvard Square Advisory Committee for 15 years. He also served on the Harvard Square Historic District Study Committee that resulted in the Harvard Square Conservation District. Frank and Joan Sulis-Kramer have two daughters, 16 and 22, both of whom attended the Cambridge public schools.

Upcoming Events

Interrelations and Architects Special Archives Tour, July 15, 2009

The Cambridge Historical Society, the Longfellow National Historic Site, and the Mount Auburn Cemetery will offer a special tour of their archival collections on July 15, 2009. Collectively, these institutions hold hundreds of thousands of original manuscripts, photographs, and ephemera related to the best-known residents of Cambridge. Each site will show representative pieces of its collection, describe its collection's strengths and policies, and allow questions from the guests. The theme for the display is "Interrelations and Architects." Because of the delicate nature of the material displayed, space is limited, and people who have not reserved a space will not be admitted. To sign up, or to ask a question about the event, send an email with your name and phone number to rsvp@cambridgehistory.org.

Cambridge Discovery Days August 8 and 15, 2009

August 8

Walking tour: The Residential Architecture of Olde Cambridge, led by Karen Davis

August 15

Walking tour: Cambridge's Folk Music Scene, co-sponsored by the Cambridge Historical Society and the New England Folk Music Archives

Both August 8 and 15

The Cambridge Historical Society wants to scan your vintage photographs and give you Toscanini's Ice Cream! Do you have family photos, images of an event in Cambridge, or snapshots of Cambridge scenes? We would like you to bring them to the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House on August 8 and 15. Your photographs will be scanned by a professional while you wait and enjoy free ice cream donated by Toscanini's. We will preserve your memories in our digital library, and an exhibition of the scans will appear on our website in September. We hope you will join us for a fun afternoon of making history!

CHS Welcomes New Assistant Director, Cynthia Brennan

The Cambridge Historical Society is happy to welcome Cynthia Brennan as its new assistant director. She is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, where she



created her own major, concentrating in photography and encompassing literature, art history,

sociology, and other disciplines. She also worked at the Center for Instructional Media Technology, helping students and professors at the university.

Brennan then worked with Newsbank as it digitized large swaths of the broadsides and ephemera collection at the American Antiquarian Society, then moved on to the Society's staff as Digital Assets Assistant and later as the Rights and Imaging Coordinator.

Brennan's adventures have included traveling alone to China, playing in a band, riding her bicycle all over the metro area, living in Dudley Square, and working at Mobilia Gallery on Huron Avenue.

"I am thrilled to have been given the opportunity to work closely with an archives and membership as significant as the Cambridge Historical Society," Brennan said. "I have been with the Society for about a month now, and already I've enjoyed an engaging and informative event co-sponsored with the Cambridge African American Heritage Alliance, watched a dendrochronologist extract samples from a beam in the basement of the HLN House, painted the ends of honey locust wood to allow for even drying, and so much more. I am very excited to be a part of the CHS's future."

Interns and Projects

Folk Music in Cambridge



Summer intern Laura McCoy is working on a walking tour of folk music sites in Cambridge, using material from the Historical Society collection and the new New England Folk Music Archives. This tour should be complete by the end of July, and we hope to present it during the Cambridge Discovery Days in August. If anyone has information or photos of folk musicians in Cambridge, we would love to talk to you.

Wrapping Up Growing Up



Our spring intern, Michelle Freitas, has wrapped up her project collecting the oral histories of people who grew up in East Cambridge. Selections from these interviews with photographs will be available on the Historical Society's website and at the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House. (We would like to congratulate Michelle on graduating from Emmanuel College.)

Memorial Drive

Continued from page 1

And, until it was toppled in a 90-mph wind-storm in February 1976, the Cain's Mayonnaise sign stood at the end of Vassar Street.

So what will the venturer along Memorial Drive now find as replacements?

Most noticeable are the hotel signs – Hyatt, Courtyard by Marriott, and Royal Sonesta – which are particularly useful for cab drivers.

There are also some tasteful corporate logos and several street-and-number markings that identify otherwise anonymous buildings.

Until, that is, one gets to Magazine Street.

In its report recommending city landmark status for the SHELL sign, the Historical Commission noted that it was “architecturally significant as the only surviving ‘spectacular’ neon sign in Cambridge and one of the earliest surviving examples of such signs in the Boston area.” (The CITGO sign’s neon tubes were replaced in 2005 with LEDs.)

Constructed in 1933, the SHELL sign was moved from Boston to its present site in 1944 and stands 68 feet high. When it was working, it lit up in three phases. In the first, a red neon border around the word SHELL was illuminated, followed by the yellow lights outlining the scallop shell. Then, yellow lights illuminated the 13 flutes of the shell. In the final phase, the display briefly turned off, then fully back on. The entire cycle took 14 seconds.

The landmarking of the sign has been an on-again, off-again process.

The Historical Commission first considered the matter in 1990, then voted to recommend landmark status in 1996, two years after the sign was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

But neighborhood groups were generally opposed to commercial incursions into the neighborhood, and some residents opposed landmarking, noting that the sign was not well maintained. The City Council never acted on the Commission’s recommendation.

The landmarking study was initiated again in 2002 but tabled by the Commission and not forwarded to the City Council. The Commis-



Charles Sullivan, executive director of the Cambridge Historical Commission, holds a model of the “spectacular” SHELL sign. Unlike the original, the model lights up. (Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission)

sion “restarted the discussion” in May 2008, according to Sarah L. Burks, the Commission’s preservation planner.

Only two other objects of popular culture have been designated as landmarks.

The Read Block in Harvard Square, a group of connected commercial buildings built between 1780 and 1820, is most notable for the Tasty, a all-day lunch counter, now closed.

And the White Tower restaurant in Central Square, built in 1932-38, which is described in the landmarking report as “the earliest example of fast-food architecture in Cambridge,” and “a reflection of the retail character of Central Square in the 1930s.”

Preservation Award: Low-cost and creative

By Michael Kenney

When the U-Haul garage on Main Street needed a paint job, it turned into the restoration of a façade that recalls brighter days of car dealerships.

The project was one of two storefront renovations – along with ten residential projects – that received Certificates of Merit in the Cambridge Historical Commission's annual Preservation Recognition Program.

While other U-Haul agencies have adopted a more modern look, said Levi Parmerter, director of local operations, "we felt that Cambridge was a different kind of place and decided to restore the building as close as we could to its original appearance."

Built in 1925, over the years the building at 844 Main/15 State streets has housed a succession of dealerships, among them Chevrolet and Pontiac.



Symbolizing that history is the winged wheel emblem over the entrance. Originally sculpted, it had been chipped away and covered over. In the restoration, paint was used to reveal the emblem.

The project was nominated for an award by the Commission's staff. "We thought it was a low-cost creative solution," said preservation specialist Sarah Burks.

Other 2009 Preservation winners:
Sofra Bakery & Café, 1 Belmont St.
Restaurant (currently unoccupied), 983
Massachusetts Ave.

Residences at 164 Brattle Street,
180 Chestnut Street,
101 1/2 Inman Street,
189 Pearl Street,
17 Perry Street,
102 Thorndike Street,
107 Washington Street,
7 St. Mary Road.

Harvard Law School buildings moved to
Massachusetts Ave. and Mellen St.
Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center,
41 Second Street

Donation of Rent Control Campaign Papers

Fifteen years after Cambridge's Rent Control program was ended by a statewide referendum campaign, the records of that campaign have been donated to the Cambridge Historical Society.

"We are thrilled to have this collection," said Gavin Kleespies, executive director of the Society, in announcing the gift from Denise Jillson, who directed the campaign and is now executive director of the Harvard Square Business Association.

The documents of the Cambridge Civic Association that supported rent control are now housed at the Cambridge Public Library and those of the Rent Control Board at the Historical Commission.

"This is still a hot issue," Kleespies said, "and people are still very emotional about it. But," he added, "regardless of where you stood on the issue, it was certainly important to the history of Cambridge and the larger metropolitan region."

Begun in 1970 as an effort to stabilize the housing stock of the city, it became "the issue" in local political campaigns.

The Rent Control Commission regulated the price that could be charged by a landowner for any residential property in the city, except those that had three units or fewer and were owner-occupied.

Opponents saw it as an unconstitutional intrusion of city government into the rights of property owners. Although by the early 1990s rent control existed in just two Massachusetts communities, a politically astute group of small property owners headed by Jillson succeeded in placing a repeal question on the 1994 state ballot, where it narrowly passed.

The collection will be available to researchers once it is catalogued, said Jinny Nathans, president of the Society. The Society, she said, is currently planning a symposium on rent control for November.

Visit cambridgearchives.org to learn about collections related to rent control.

Interns and Projects

Revolutionary Cambridge



Our summer intern Caitlin Deene is working to make more information about Cambridge during the American Revolution available online as part of a project supported through a grant from the Society of the Cincinnati. Caitlin will work with CHS staff and draw on materials from our collection to create an online map of Cambridge that marks some of the significant Revolutionary sites. These sites will have links to digital copies of original material in the CHS archives. More original material the about Revolution will be available to scholars, students, and the public through our website.

Aspiring Archivist



Mike O'Connor is working with our archivist, Mark Vassar, to organize, catalogue, and create a finding aid for a collection of records related to East Cambridge temperance organizations. Mike is considering pursuing a degree in archival care.

Society News Online

www.cambridgearchives.org



The Cambridge Historical Society, Historical Commission, and the Public Library have developed a new website that allows you to access information on the archival collections of all three organizations

cambridgearchives.org has a list of all the collections and links to finding aids when available.



Ever wonder about the day-to-day work of a Historical Society? Check out our blog: <http://blogs.townonline.com/cambridgehistory/>.



Selections of photographs from processed archival collections of the Historical Society are now available on the photo-sharing site flickr.



Want to learn about the investigation into the history of the house or what new projects we have undertaken. Become a fan of CHS on Facebook



A new way to support the Cambridge Historical Society, just through doing normal online shopping. Click on the link from www.cambridgehistory.org to learn more.

What Did Cambridgeport Do to Washington Allston?

By Daphne Abeel

Although Washington Allston (1779-1843) was considered by many in his day to be the greatest American artist of his time, today he is not as well known as his older contemporary, Gilbert Stuart. Stuart had New England roots and stayed close to Boston, painting a large number of commissioned portraits of the city's upper and upper middle class.

Allston painted portraits, too, but he ventured much further afield, both artistically and geographically.

Born in South Carolina, he moved to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1787 and graduated from Harvard College in 1800.

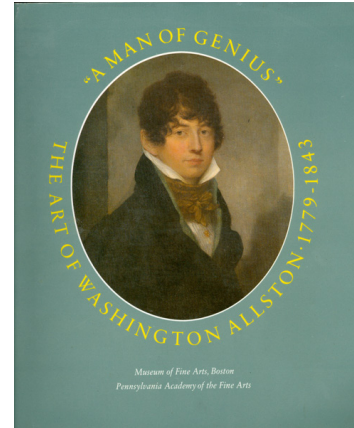
Allston spent two periods of his life abroad, traveling in 1801 to London, where he studied at the Royal Academy with the American-born painter Benjamin West. After a brief period back in the United States, he returned to England in 1810 with his first wife, Ann Channing. He then traveled to Rome, where he spent years studying the Italian masters and depicting landscapes in the classical manner.

He returned to London, where he lived until 1818 and enjoyed increasing fame and praise from influential intellectuals, including the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who called Allston "a man of genius, and the best painter yet produced by America."

It is the third phase in Allston's life that may have particular relevance to Cambridge residents. Following the death of his first wife, he married her first cousin, Martha Remington Dana. In 1830, the couple settled into a house at 172-174 Auburn St. in Cambridgeport. After it burned in 1852, the couple built a new house at 192-199 Auburn St., which still stands. Allston's studio, also on Auburn Street, was later moved to Valentine Street and demolished.

Here, according to many of his friends, Allston lived in intellectual and artistic isolation. In the 1830s, Old Cambridge was a city of writers and metaphysicians while Cambridgeport was a trade center on the brink of becoming an early industrial

center; apparently neither was nurturing of artists.



Bicentennial Retrospective Catalogue (Courtesy of Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

Although Allston continued to paint and write poetry, his star was falling. According to Henry James, Allston's inability to finish an important work, *Belshazzar's Feast*, was due to "the grim synthetic fact of Cambridge-

port." Never one to mince words, Margaret Fuller, who lived on Cherry Street, wrote, "Cambridgeport has rotted the man's soul. He cannot finish his *Belshazzar's Feast*."

Rather than lay the blame on Cambridgeport, it seems more likely, as William H. Gerdts, co-curator of a 1979 bicentennial retrospective at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, suggests, that Allston was put off course in part by Gilbert Stuart's criticism of the painting's perspective and by the fashion in painting drifting away from the portrayal of biblical, literary and historical scenes.

Allston died in 1843 and rests in the Cambridge Burial Ground. His works are collected in many of the nation's museums, including Boston's MFA. While his name may not be familiar to everyone, his reputation with the cognoscenti is secure. In the catalogue for the exhibit, Gerdts wrote that "Allston was the most complete representative of the romantic age of American painting."

While some thought that Cambridgeport ruined him, he is remembered there with a plaque at the corner of Auburn and Magazine streets. A street in Cambridgeport is named after him, and his name lives on across the river, in the Boston neighborhood of Allston.

Spring Benefit: Fresh Pond, Resort and Resource

We would like to thank Steven Corda, Jean Rogers and the Cambridge Water Department for hosting our spring gala.

The Cambridge Historical Society greatly appreciates the support of our sponsors, listed below:

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Mysterious Wallpaper Appears Behind the Plaster



The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House is undergoing a repainting and restoration project. Any project on a house that dates back to the seventeenth century is bound to bring up a few unexpected finds. A while ago, one of the carpenters from Buttonwood Renovations, the company that painstakingly restored the house, was preparing a wall

to be painted, and as he was chasing a crack, a piece of plaster fell off. This was not remarkable, but below we found that the plaster was on hand-riven lathe and that there was a previously unknown wallpaper below the lathe. The wallpaper is mounted on a solid board wall, and there is a second paper underneath it. All of this is very curious. The wallpaper appears to have an almost neoclassical design; however, the hand-riven lathe that covered it suggests that it was covered by the early nineteenth century. Its being mounted on a board wall suggests that it is part of an early construction. Right now, it is a mystery. What do you think?

From the President

Membership begins at home.

If you are getting this newsletter, you are probably a member of the Cambridge Historical Society, and we are grateful for your support of our programs, publications, and other outreach activities. But we need even more. Please consider upgrading your current membership level or giving a membership to someone you know. If you're not a member, please join. That old saying is true about strength in numbers. Membership organizations like the Cambridge Historical Society depend on your support, and a strong membership roster means a strong and active organization. Please join.

Jinny Nathans

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