

WHITE PLACE - NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICT

entered into Register 10/17/1985



Meyson Garden



White Place
AREA L

1976 Atlas -
WASHINGTON

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE of area. (Describe physical setting, general character, and architecturally significant structures).

The White Place neighborhood consists of 36 houses, barns, and sheds built between c. 1835 and 1905. It is one of the larger concentrations of mid 19th century vernacular architecture to be found in Brookline, with one half of its structures predating 1866. To a substantial degree, it is dominated by "cottages" whose original or altered designs are derivatives of the Italianate style. This can be seen in #s 9,14,16, 24,26,45,49,51, and 62. In the present facades of these buildings can be seen such Italianate type elements as steeply pitched gable roofs, deep eaves, entrances located to one side with bracketed hoods, polygonal bay windows, and 2/2 windows.

Another style represented on White Place is the Picturesque, an interpretation of which can be seen at 21-3, and , to a lesser degree, 17. Of particular interest in the double house is the treatment of the windows with slanted cornice caps supported on simple brackets. Similar

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE of area. (Explain development of area, what caused it, and how it affected community; be specific).

The land on which White Place was laid out in the mid 19th century was once part of the Leverett farm. It came into the hands of the White family, which used it as pasture land, in 1722 when Major Edward White purchased 5 1/4 acres of land which had belonged to Caleb Gardner. When Edward White died in 1769, the land passed on to his son Benjamin who in turn bequeathed it to his son Thomas. Thomas owned it from the time of his father's death in 1790 until 1817. From that time until 1846 at which time it was sold to Samuel A. Walker, the land belonged to Thomas White's wife and heirs.

The Whites were an old Brookline family; the first generation was represented by John White who traveled from England to Watertown in 1638 and settled in Muddy River in 1650. John White was one of the larger landowners in town who had obtained his property through purchase. He began by buying part of the Leverett grant to which he added a number of smaller properties and eventually owned over 300 acres. Two of his sons, Benjamin and Joseph, and their descendents remained in Brookline like their father who was a constable, surveyor of highways, and perambulator of town boundaries, Benjamin and Joseph were involved in their community as well as signer of Muddy River's petition for independence from Boston. Benjamin, an ensign and a sergeant, had five daughters and one son, Edward. The latter seemed to have inherited his grandfather's interest in land acquisition as well as his father's interest in the military, for he was Captain of the Brookline Foot Company.

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INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
Office of the Secretary, Boston

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Indicate each item on inventory form which is being continued below.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE (1)

treatment of the windows as well as the door is found at #17. Note, too, the trefoil-type motif at the ends of the roof rafters. The protruding rafter ends along the eaves of #21-3 should also be noted along with the steeply pitched gable roofs of both houses. Number 21-3 in particular has more architectural pretense than many of the other houses, therefore it is not surprising to learn that it as well as #17 were probably designed by Charles Follen, a landscape architect by training and an architect by experience. He was a partner in the firm of Lee and Follen (see area form for Chestnut Hill) and was responsible for the design of a schoolhouse and a chapel in the early suburban development of Chestnut Hill in the mid 19th century.

There are also houses whose original designs were oriented to the late Georgian period in their basic shape, shallow scaled cornice, and two story height. Included in this group are #s 14,16,20,24 and 26. Numbers 14,16, and 26 are three bays wide with a lunette window in the gable end; the doorway of #26 evidences the influence of the Greek Revival style, while the others are hooded with brackets, clearly additions prompted by the popularity of the Italianate style in the 1850's and 60's. The one story bays on the front facade of #s 14 and 16 are also later additions. Written documentation and maps indicated that these houses were moved to White Place from the vicinity of the Punch Bowl Tavern during the 1850's. Stylistically they seem to date from the 1830's.

A third distinctive type is the triple decker, found at #s 12,34,35,38, 41,41-3, and 64 White Place. These were built between 1890 and 1905. Three, #s 12,34 and 35, have details which are Colonial Revival in origin: dentils, classical cornices and entablatures, and pedimented entrances. Others have such diverse elements as a staggered butt shingled exterior; bracketed hooded entrances; and double brackets under the eaves. Unfortunately, the application of aluminum and vinyl siding has eliminated some of the other architectural details such as the bracketed window hoods, once found at #40.

The visual continuity of the narrow street stems from a number of factors. One consideration is the size of the buildings which has been dictated by the unusually small building lots. The smallest is 1120 square feet; an average size is approximately 2250 square feet. Some of the lots are larger, but have two buildings situated on them. As a result of this and the construction dates of a majority of the houses, 14 of the 32 houses on White Place are only 1 1/2 or 2 stories high; 10 are 2 1/2 stories high, but that number include houses which were raised one story when major construction occurred on the railroad bridge and along Washington Street in Brookline Village (late 1880's).

Consistency is found in the buildings' lots and heights and the predominance of a number of interpretations of the Italianate style. The fact that much of the housing was originally built as rental property

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ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE (2)

for laborers and journeymen contributes to the physical continuity of the street. Finally, because of the relative isolation of the street, with railroad tracks on one side, a steep embankment towards Davis Avenue on the other, and White Place not becoming a through street until 1911, there has been little change in the neighborhood's appearance. Only two of the original buildings haven been demolished since the development's beginning in the mid 1850's. The newest structure, #50-2, was built in the early 1920's. All of this has created a visual uniformity which is unmatched in any other Brookline neighborhood. In addition, the type of worker's cottages found here is unique to the town. Comparisons have been made, however, with cottages found in East Cambridge.

Alterations and additions to existing properties has ocured; in some cases, the change has represented a marked improvement, such as the replacement of asbestos siding with clapboards. There have been a few, however, which removed important architectural details and original building fabric. In general, not many of the changes have de-based the buildings, nor can they be considered really inalterable.

Finally, although the street is dominated by houses, there are a few businesses; especially towards the west end of the street. Some of the original barns and warehouses of James Seamans have become carpentry and sheet metal shops, while others continue to be used for storage purposes.

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HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (1)

and a major in Colonel William Dudley's regiment. Edward's son Benjamin, who inherited what was to become White Place, was also a captain as well as a Brookline selectman, assessor, and representative to the General Court. He married Elizabeth Aspinwall, sister of Dr. William Aspinwall, pioneer in the field of smallpox inoculation and one of their sons, Oliver, the town's first postmaster, changed the spelling of the family's name from White to Whyte. Another son, Thomas (1763-1817) was the person responsible for holding on to the family's land in the Village despite the insolvency of his father's estate. Thomas White's house was across the road from the Punch Bowl Tavern; the front of it was a store. Oliver Whyte lived on the corner of High and Walnut Streets in a house which was later replaced by the Brookline Union Building, now also demolished. A third son, Benjamin, inherited his father's property at 203 Heath Street.

When Samuel A. Walker, a local real estate autioneer and owner of Lyceum Hall in Brookline Village, bought the White property from Thomas's widow, Rachel, in 1846, there was one house on the land. This house is shown on the 1844 map of the town and is noted as belonging to the estate of Thomas White. It is not on the 1854 subdivision plan for White Place (L/12/D/24), nor does it appear on the 1855 map. There are, however, five houses and two outbuildings on the 1854 plan, all belonging to Walker.

White Place seems to have been laid out by 1848, and in an effort to encourage development in this new residential area bordering what was shortly to become the town's major commercial center, Walker bought some older homes and had them moved to his property. Three of these were moved from Washington Street and, according to Harriet Woods, are the present #s 10, 14, and 16. Woods states in her book, Historical Sketches of Brookline, that the old Punch Bowl Tavern, once the town's central meeting place and main stop in Brookline on roads leading north and west from Boston, lost its prominence when the Mill Dam and the railroad across it was constructed. Consequently, the 18th century tavern was purchased in 1833 by Isaac Thayer who owned a leather and shoe concern in Boston and had recently moved to Davis Avenue (then Washington Place). Thayer tore down the tavern but used some of its solid oak timbers to build nine houses which he constructed near the tavern's site. Three of these nine were purchased by Walker and with the creativity characteristic of this entrepreneur, moved to White Place, then a dead-end lane.

Possibly two other old houses, #s 20 and 24, were also moved to White Place by Walker. They were, according to Woods, ancient houses which stood near the corner of Boylston and Washington Streets. Both "quite rebuilt" were moved and were "the fourth and fifth on the left side." Finally, #26, another old house, possibly dating from the 1830's like the other five mentioned, appears on an 1858 map of Brookline. It too

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HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (2)

might have been moved from the Washington Street area. An alternate theory is that these houses were built by Thomas White and were located elsewhere on his property before being moved here.

In 1854 Walker owned almost all of the land on the south side of the street, however seven lots on the north side had been sold to Charles Follen. An additional four small parcels had been sold to James Seamans, along with two large lots, towards the west end of the street. Single lots belonged to a number of individuals, including Reuben Chace, a painter and glazier, who built 280-84 Washington Street in 1875. By the following year (1855), Follen had built 21-3 White Place, and this and the houses which Walker moved totalled six houses on the street. By 1858 there were eleven; new ones included #17 (built by Follen) ^{arv} #s 25, 27, 33, and 62, built by Chace, A.B. Smyth (a switchman), J.O. Libbey, and E. Mealey (a laborer), respectively. Between 1859 and 1871, the number grew to twenty-three, over half of the buildings standing on the street today.

In 1865 the bridge at the corner of White Place had two arches: one for the passage of trains and one for the entrance to White Place. To enter from the bridge, one descended a flight of wooden steps on the easterly side by the retaining wall, and thence through a driveway underneath leading from the station. If travelling by carriage, one went on to the beginning of the decline and down to the driveway underneath the bridge. The widening of the bridge in 1886 changed all this. The grade was raised up to the bridge with buildings and lots also raised to the new grade at public expense which eventually totalled \$12,000. The entrance to White Place after construction was made from the bridge, with Halfenstein's tailor shop (now the location of #2) facing the street. The other major change to the street (which was accepted as a public way in 1885), less dramatic, was its extension to Davis Avenue in 1911. Before that date it was a dead end lane with a turn-around in front of #64.

During the early years of development, the turnover in terms of tenants and owners was high, with some seemingly buying on speculation or renting until sufficient funds could be amassed to buy a home elsewhere. The number of people who lived on White Place for a short period of time before moving to a different part of town is reflected in the real estate and poll tax lists between 1867 and 1880.

Judging from the occupations of the residents, one can conclude that White Place was often a stop on the way for upwardly mobile families who were headed for other locations such as Washington, Prospect, School or Holden Streets. Both skilled and unskilled laborers as well as journeymen lived here, often with unskilled renting and craftsmen and journeymen owning.

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HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (3)

The first generation of owners such as Walker, Folen, and Seamans were men from professional classes or were shopkeepers. Their tenants were skilled and unskilled workers. During the 1860's and 70's owners such as D.W. Phelps and D.A. Adams were craftsmen; in these two cases, a carpenter and a mason. Their tenants were teamsters, town employees, laborers and coachmen. James Seamans, a grocer and local entrepreneur in Brookline Village after the Civil War, built houses and barns throughout these two periods. He lived on Cypress Street, built 256 Washington Street in 1888 to replace a smaller wooden store, and constructed stables, barns, and storehouses on White Place to store hay and grain for his delivery wagon horses and goods to be sold in his store. The renters of the houses which he built on White Place included a coachman, hostler, blacksmith, and sheet iron worker.

When the three deckers were built between 1890 and 1905, their owners covered a range of occupations, from mason and plasterer to a town laborer and from a pharmacist to a laundry owner. A random sampling of the renters' occupations in local directories revealed a meat cutter, teamster, laborer, nickel plater, janitor, lineman, and gardener.

During the later decades of the 19th century, greater longevity for ownership became evident, with some houses being kept in the same family for several generations. In another situation, a property owner built a house across the street from the house in which he had grown up.

Not long ago, White Place was threatened with demolition through urban renewal. Obviously the plan was defeated, and over the past 10 to 15 years, it has been replaced with one involving renovation, rehabilitation, and in some cases, restoration. In addition to the maintenance and improved condition of many of the buildings, the other noticeable aspect in a physical assessment of White Place is the interest in landscaping and gardening. The stabilization of this neighborhood is due to a number of factors, including the increasing number of owner-occupied homes; two income families; and a growing interest in living in and rehabbing older homes. Such stabilization is reflected in the upkeep of the buildings; the emerging popularity of this street, a neighborhood in itself; and a growing sense of identity and pride.

White Place meets NR criteria A and C, being a unique neighborhood of mid 19th century vernacular architecture and workers' housing which developed in response to the emerging importance of Brookline Village as the town's major commercial and civic center.

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