

From: Julia Malakie <MalakieWard3@gmail.com>

To: Julia <malakiephoto@aim.com>

Subject: Public hearing Thursday 5/23 on demolition of three historic commercial buildings near WN Square

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West Newton Village Center Historic District buildings at risk for demolition - public hearing Thursday, May 23, 7pm, City Hall Rm 205

You may not be aware that in 1990, a collection of buildings designated the West Newton Village Historic District was recognized by the National Register of Historic Places as worthy of preservation, for both architectural and historical significance. It was noted that West Newton Square was "the most intact, and second largest of Newton's village centers preserving an extensive collection of late 19th and early 20th century commercial and institutional buildings."

Now, three of those buildings are at risk for demolition. The Newton Historical Commission on Thursday night will hold a public hearing on requests to demolish 1253 Washington Street (the Brezniak-Rodman Funeral Home, 1239-1247 Washington Street (formerly a bicycle shop, which you may recall was used by the Principle Group last summer for the Hello Washington Street Public Design Week), and 1235 Washington Street (Newton Auto Group building).

All three buildings are owned by trusts controlled by members of the Donato family, who are partnering with Mark Development (Robert Korff) in the early

stages of a proposal for a large-scale redevelopment of seven acres of what has been dubbed the "Cheesecake Blocks" in the Principle Group's Washington Street Vision Plan.

Because these buildings are in a National Register district, the Newton Historical Commission (NHC) can impose an 18-month demolition delay in order to encourage alternatives to demolition, and Planning Department staff has, thankfully, recommended the buildings be preferably preserved, and 18-month delays be imposed. Read [their memo](#), with details on the history and architecture of these buildings. A 1988 inventory and map of all buildings in the Historic District is included in the [packet for Thursday's NHC meeting](#).

If you care about preserving West Newton Square's historical and architectural assets, and the context of Newton's most intact village center, please come to the public hearing Thursday, and speak if you can. These properties will be the first items on the agenda. You can also write to the NHC via Katy Hax Holmes at kholmes@newtonma.gov. The NHC needs to know that people care about preservation, because they are under great pressure from developers who don't want to preserve buildings.

The NHC considers the historic and architectural value of buildings, and their context. Whether you or I consider them attractive is not really a factor. So I'm always troubled when I hear older buildings described as "tired" or "rundown" as a justification for demolition. This seems to reward lack of maintenance on the part of owners.

Here's a snapshot of each building, with information from the documents linked to above, and some comments of my own:



Built around 1850, according to the Assessors Database, the 1253 Washington Street building has been an undertakers/funeral home since at least 1861, with Stephen F. Cate running a livery stable and undertakers business until the 1890s when Henry F. Cate took over. The Cate name was on the business into the 1980s, before it became the Brezniak-Rodman office and chapel. The Classical Revival brick facade was added in 1926.

This funeral home shows what an older building looks like when a business cares about maintaining it.



To the right, 1239-1247 Washington Street was built in the Classical Revival style in 1925. Its early uses by the Heffron Motor Car Company, and West Newton Auto Body & Welding Company, contributed to early 20th Century commercial development.

Today, the scale of this and nearby buildings allows the historic Railroad Hotel/Seth Davis Tavern (peaked roof at left), built in 1831, and beyond it the Victorian Gothic Robinson Block (CVS building) to remain the most prominent.

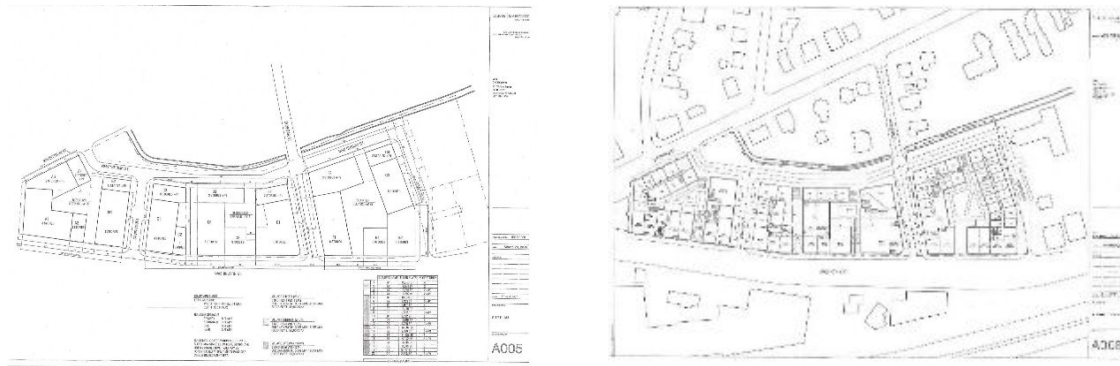


The Colonial Revival style gas station was built in 1926 for the Atlantic Refining Company, and added on to in the 1930s. At the time of National Register application, it was considered a good example of a type of gas station that was fast disappearing. Not relevant to the NHC, but important to me -- the setback from the street has allowed for what is probably the largest canopy of any street tree in West Newton Square. Front parking lots are now out of favor, but this area does not have to remain asphalt; it could become a landscaped plaza for a different type of business.

Why now?

Buildings that are National Register listed, individually or as part of a district, may have an 18-month demolition delay imposed, rather than the standard 12-month delay for non-listed buildings older than 50 years which the NHC considers worthy of preservation. This starts the clock on these three buildings. There are many more buildings nearby in a seven-acre area which the Mark Development/Donato partnership is targeting for redevelopment. [This is the list](#) submitted to the city for a Development Review Team (DRT, composed of city staff) meeting on March 27. DRT meeting notes are [here](#).

It is not a consideration for the NHC what would replace a building requested to be demolished. Nor is it clear how fast or how soon Mark Development intends to proceed with their proposal. But in case you are wondering, here are some preliminary plans provided to the Planning Department:



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Our mailing address is:

Committee to Elect Julia Malakie
430 Winchester St
Newton, MA 02461

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