



## CHAPTER 2 – WELLESLEY’S HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The Town of Wellesley has a number of historic neighborhoods that could become local historic districts should their residents so desire. In conjunction with its Historic Home Plaques Program, the Wellesley Historical Commission has conducted research on over 760 residential properties in the Town that were constructed over 100 years ago. Most of these properties are located in historic neighborhoods created as planned subdivisions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At present, Wellesley has one neighborhood designated as a Local Historic District, the Cottage Street Historic District, along with four Single Building Historic Districts. These existing historic districts are briefly described below.

## THE COTTAGE STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

The Cottage Street Historic District was designated in 1980 soon after the Town adopted its historic district bylaw. The historic district is located a quarter-mile southwest of Town Hall and its commercial center and primarily includes residences along Cottage Street and Weston Road near their intersection with Washington Street.

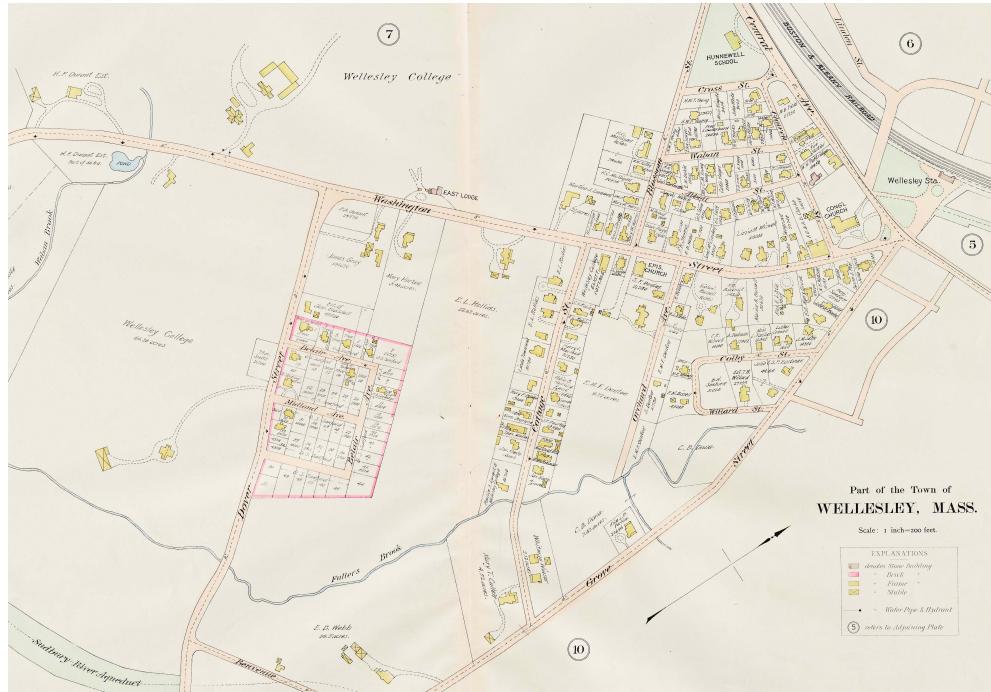
The Cottage Street neighborhood was selected for study by the Wellesley Historical Commission because it was felt to have the highest concentration of buildings dating back to the Town's incorporation in 1881. The historic district includes 65 properties, 28 of which date to before 1881 and another 15 that date to before 1900.

The Cottage Street Historic District is described in the Wellesley Historic District Study Committee's 1980 report, which was required for designation and is available on the Historic District Commission's website.

The report's historical overview is conversational and uncited, and a number of the dates for historic homes listed in the report have been subsequently updated through research conducted through the Historic Home Plaques Program.

In 1848, Charles B. Lovewell constructed a prominent Greek Revival residence at what is now 641 Washington Street. In 1854, he had a street laid out on the portion of his property extending from Washington Street (then Sherborn Street) south to Fuller Brook which he subdivided into 32 small lots. The configuration of the lots remains largely intact today.

Originally, the street was called Lovewell Street, but its name was changed to Cottage Street in 1876, representing the character of the small early homes constructed there. Two of the residences existing along the street today are thought to date to 1856/57 and are shown on the 1856 map of Needham, before the Town of Wellesley was incorporated. Five are thought to date to the 1860s, and eight to the 1870s.



Vicinity of the Cottage Street Historic District from the 1897 atlas of Wellesley (Plate 9).

## WELLESLEY'S HISTORIC DISTRICTS

By the early 1860s, Charles Lovewell had built a small shoe factory on the property that is now 630 Washington Street, the intersection of Washington and Cottage Streets. The early homes along Cottage Street are thought to have been built in relation to this factory.

Lovewell sold his factory to John Tucker in 1875. Tucker constructed a larger four-story factory in 1879 adjacent to the original and converted the original into a dormitory for women workers.

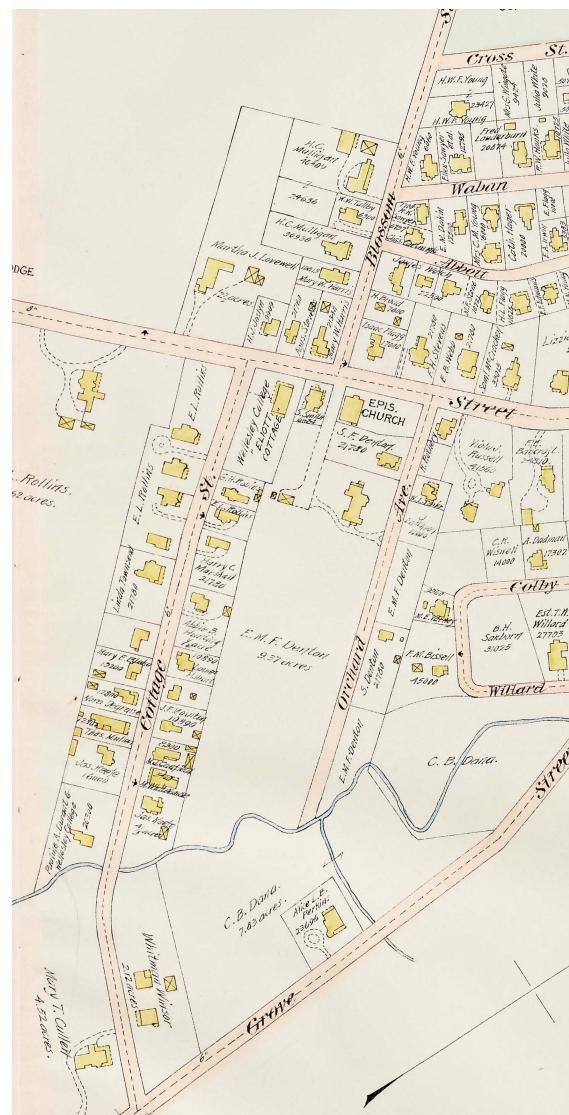
In 1885, the Tucker factory was purchased by Pauline Durant, who with her husband Henry had founded Wellesley College in 1870, and Horatio Hunnewell, prominent owner of a nearby estate. The apparent purpose was to eliminate the industrial use from the vicinity. The larger factory building was torn down, and the original building was converted into a dormitory for college students and named Elliot House.

The close proximity of Wellesley College influenced the character and use of the neighborhood. The Lovewell residence became a boarding house for students and faculty. The house at 17 Cottage Street was expanded as a dormitory. Other homes are also believed to have been adapted and enlarged for student and faculty use. In 1911, a dining hall was added to Elliot House; a larger dormitory had been constructed across the street from it as well. Elliot House was demolished in 1953, and the larger dormitory is also gone.

At the south end of Cottage Street near Fuller Brook were at least three hand-laundries. One of the laundries, now 47 and 49 Cottage Street, was later converted to a machine-laundry and was not demolished until 1954. Two cottage-style homes were built on the site in 1956.

Residences continued to be constructed on lots along Cottage Street into the early twentieth century, some possibly replacing smaller earlier structures. At the north end of the street, three large residences were built

on the west side of the street by Edwin Rollins, owner of a large residence and property immediately adjacent to the west. Two of the residences, 7 and 11 Cottage Street, were constructed for his sons. The third, 9 Cottage Street, was constructed for his pastor. The 1897 atlas indicates that Rollins also owned the property at 15 Cottage Street.



Detail of Cottage Street area in the 1897 atlas.



Several homes were moved onto lots along Cottage Street from other locations. The residence at 33 Cottage Street, dating to 1853, was moved here from the Town Hall grounds when Wellesley was incorporated in 1881 and Town Hall was constructed.

The house at 8 Cottage Street was built as a private residence on Denton Road in 1906. It was purchased by St. Andrews Church in 1917 for use as the church's Guild House. In 1948, the house was moved to its current site to make space for construction of a new Parish House.

6 Cottage Street is not technically within the historic district boundary but does contribute to the historic character of the neighborhood. This Shingle Style building was originally constructed on Denton Road in 1899 and served as St. Andrew's Rectory. In 1982, it was moved to a subdivided portion of the church parking lot where Elliot House had been located and converted to a private residence.

58 Cottage Street was originally constructed in 1856 on Grove Street and was later moved to its present location.

Weston Road, like Washington Street, was an early connecting road within the region as shown on an 1856 map of Needham.

The Washington Street–Weston Road portion of the historic district includes five buildings dating to before 1850, including the Lovewell residence. The home at 631 Washington Street is dated to 1755, while three residences along Weston Road are dated to the 1830s. All have later additions and modifications.

Other residences in the Washington Street–Weston Road area date primarily to the 1880s and 1890s, by which time the vicinity, including Waban and Abbott Streets, was being developed as a residential subdivision.

As outlined above, the Cottage Street Historic District derives from multiple periods of the Town's development ranging from the mid-

eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century but concentrated primarily between the 1830s and 1920s. In this respect, it is different from most of Wellesley's historic neighborhoods, which were developed as discrete subdivisions with houses being constructed during the same general time period.

Consequently, the Cottage Street district has a wide diversity of building types, from early/mid-eighteenth century cottage vernacular and high style Greek Revival residences, to the workers' cottages associated with the Lovewell and Tucker factories, to the affluent late nineteenth and early twentieth century residences associated with the Robbins family, St. Andrews Church, and surrounding subdivisions in general.

Buildings within the Cottage Street Historic District have a high degree of historic integrity, though many of the early smaller residences have been significantly expanded and adapted for changes in use over time.



## SINGLE BUILDING HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Single Building Historic Districts are a means through which individual historic buildings can be protected from demolition or inappropriate change by property owners. The protections afforded through designation as a district are similar to those achieved through a preservation restriction or easement, but less costly and easier to implement, with the Town willing to oversee proposed changes to the property through the expertise of the Historic District Commission.

Property owners may have many reasons to desire the protection of their historic building. In the cases of Wellesley's four current Single Building Historic Districts, two were protected because of their rich history, one was preserved for its architectural design and association with its designer, and one was protected for its association with a person of literary note.

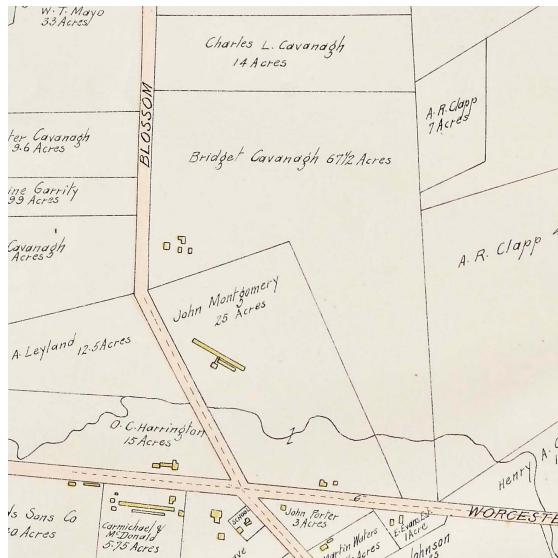
**Methodist Meeting House Historic District**  
The single family residence known as the Methodist Meeting House is located at 377 Weston Road at the intersection with Elmwood Road. The house was designated as a historic district in 2011 and is reviewed in a professional quality study report available on the Historic District Commission website.

The rectangular core of the building was constructed in 1798 as a Methodist Meeting House at a site about a half-mile north of its current location. The original site of the Meeting is shown on the 1856 map of Needham. The Meeting House fell into disuse after 1842, and in 1860 it was sold at auction to Michael Cavanaugh, who moved it a half mile south to its present location and converted it to a residence.

Cavanaugh was a farmer, and his previous farmhouse had burned. The configuration of the converted Meeting House residence and its related outbuildings (no longer existing) is

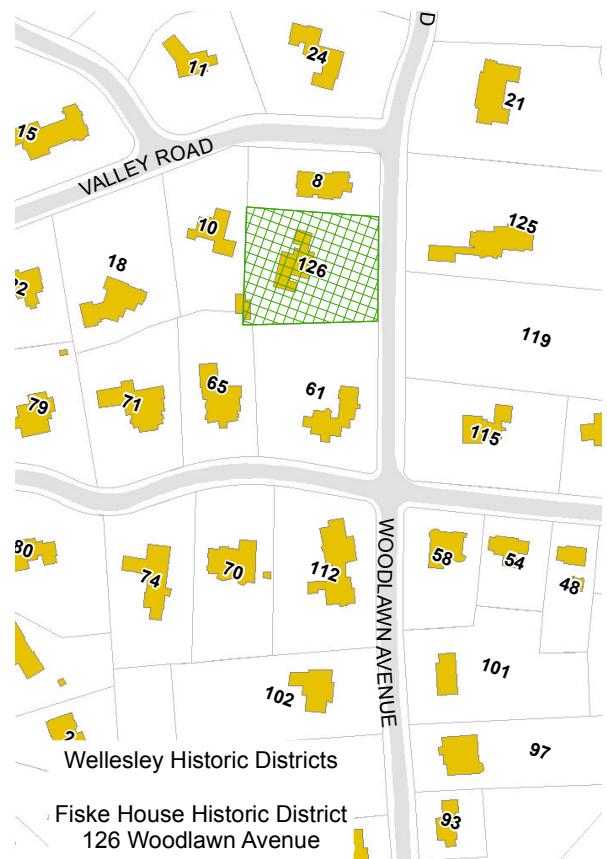
shown on the 1897 atlas of Wellesley. In the early 1940s, the farm was developed as a subdivision, and the farmhouse was retained on one of the subdivision's small lots.

Since its conversion to a residence in 1860 and designation as a local historic district, the Meeting House had been occupied by only three families. Its front porch was added after its conversion, and its original windows were replaced with 2-over-2 wood doublehung windows. A one story addition was added to the rear in 1993. The house exhibits layers of history and architectural detailing dating back to the late eighteenth century and has connections to the social, religious, agricultural, and economic development of the Town.



*The Cavanaugh farmstead shown in 1897 on the east side of Blossom Road, now Weston Road.*

## WELLESLEY'S HISTORIC DISTRICTS



## Fiske House Historic District

The Fiske House is located at 126 Woodlawn Avenue between Valley and Hundreds Roads in the northeastern portion of the Town. The house was designated as a historic district in 2014 and is reviewed in a professional quality study report available on the Historic District Commission website.

The Fiske House was constructed during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, possibly in 1824 in conjunction with a sale of the property at that time. The farmhouse was part of a 180-acre farm that was purchased by Enoch Fiske between 1794 and 1802. It is not known whether an earlier farmhouse on the site was razed or incorporated into the current building. The farmhouse is visible on both the 1856 map of Needham and the 1897 atlas of Wellesley.

For 103 years, from 1833 until 1937, the property was in the possession of the family of Emery Fiske (1803-1868), a cousin of Enoch. Perhaps the most prominent owner was his son, Joseph E. Fiske (1839-1909), who was instrumental in Town affairs, including the incorporation of Wellesley as a separate town.

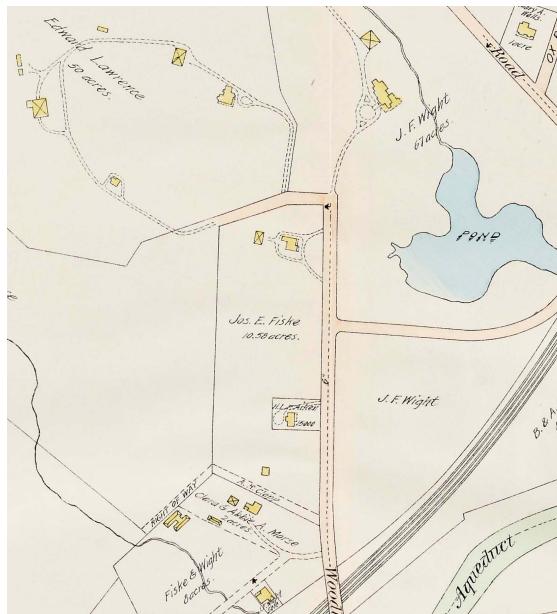
In the late 1800s, Joseph Fiske sold much of the property associated with the farm to two men each of whom developed their own large estates. The 1897 atlas shows the Fiske House on the remaining 10.58-acre property.

Joseph Fiske's daughter, Ellen Ware Fiske (1871-1953), lived in the house following Joseph's passing. Ellen was influential socially and was known as Wellesley's Town Historian. She sold the property in 1937, probably at the time the Fiske property and two adjacent estates were developed into the Woodlawn Farms subdivision. The historic Fiske House was retained on its current, much smaller residential lot.

The new owners undertook extensive renovations, transforming the residence from an unpretentious early nineteenth century

farmhouse into the elegant Colonial Revival residence it is today. Designed by architect and Wellesley resident Walter Henry Pratt, the building was rotated from the south to the east to face the road, and porch and garage wings were added to the new side south and north facades. The former barn to the west of the house was demolished.

The Fiske House is significant architecturally both for its nineteenth century farmhouse design and 1937/38 renovations. It is also significant for its association with the Fiske family and their involvement with and contributions to the Town's history.



**The Joseph Fiske property is shown at the center of this detail of the 1897 atlas, after sale of much of the former farm to two adjacent landowners.**

### Tufts House Historic District

The Tufts House is located at 38 Lowell Road just east of Edmunds Road in the north-central portion of the Town. The house was designated as a historic district in 2011 along with the Methodist Meeting House and is reviewed in the study report available on the Historic District Commission website.

The Tufts House was designed by architect Nathaniel P. Tufts in 1930 for himself and his family and is a well-preserved early example of Colonial Revival residential architecture in Wellesley. It was nominated for designation as a local historic district by Doris Tufts Heinold, Nathaniel's daughter who was living in the house in 2011, in memory of her father and in recognition of the building's outstanding architectural quality.

Nathaniel Tufts studied architecture at Boston University and for many years worked with the architectural firm of Royal Barry Wills, one of the country's best known proponents of the Colonial Revival Movement. In his years with Willis, Tufts studied and reproduced actual interior and exterior details and proportions from the Colonial Period and in doing so helped develop the Willis firm's signature Colonial Revival style.

The Tufts House was one of the first homes built in the Cliff Estates subdivision in Wellesley. In his design, Tufts reproduced the accurate proportions and details of a Colonial house with contemporary interpretation. The quality of the design and his attention to detail resulted in a building of distinction and significance to the 1930 period of residential development in Wellesley.



### Silvia Plath House Historic District

The Silvia Plath House is located at 26 Elmwood Road, a block east of the Methodist Meeting House on Weston Road, and was built in 1942. The house was designated as a historic district in 2014 along with the Fiske House and is reviewed in the study report available on the Historic District Commission website.

Silvia Plath (1932-1963) was an acclaimed poet and author and lived in the house with her mother and brother soon after it was constructed. Plath attended the Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School (now Wellesley High School) graduating in 1950.

Silvia graduated from Smith *summa cum laude* in 1955 and attended Cambridge University as a Fulbright Scholar. There she married British poet Ted Hughes in 1956. The pair had two children before the stormy relationship ended in separation in 1962.

Plath was clinically depressed for most of her life. She attempted suicide several times and was under periodic medical treatment. In August 1953, while a third year student at Smith College, Silvia made her first documented suicide attempt by crawling under the porch at the Elmwood Road house and taking her mother's sleeping pills. She was there for three days and later wrote of the experience in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, completed in 1961.

Plath was a prolific writer and is best known for the poems she wrote in the last years of her life that were published posthumously. She is credited with advancing the confessional style of poetry and wrote about traditional gender roles and the way in which they stifled women. Plath used her writing as an outlet for the haunting and depressed moods that descended upon her throughout her life. She took her own life in 1963 while living in London. In 1982, she was awarded a posthumous *Pulitzer Prize* for her *Collected Poems*.

The Silvia Plath House is a Colonial Revival residence typical of the dwellings constructed in the surrounding Fells area subdivisions between the 1930s and 1950s. The house has remained largely unchanged since its construction. Modifications include a one-story rear addition built in 1988 and the application of aluminum siding to the exterior.

