

Donald McKay House

Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report



Petition # 3, 78-80 White Street, Boston

Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission
on the potential designation of the DONALD MCKAY HOUSE
as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975

Approved by: Marcia Nyus Jan 4, 1977
Executive Director Date

Accepted by: Pauline Chase Handl Jan 4, 1977
Chairman Date

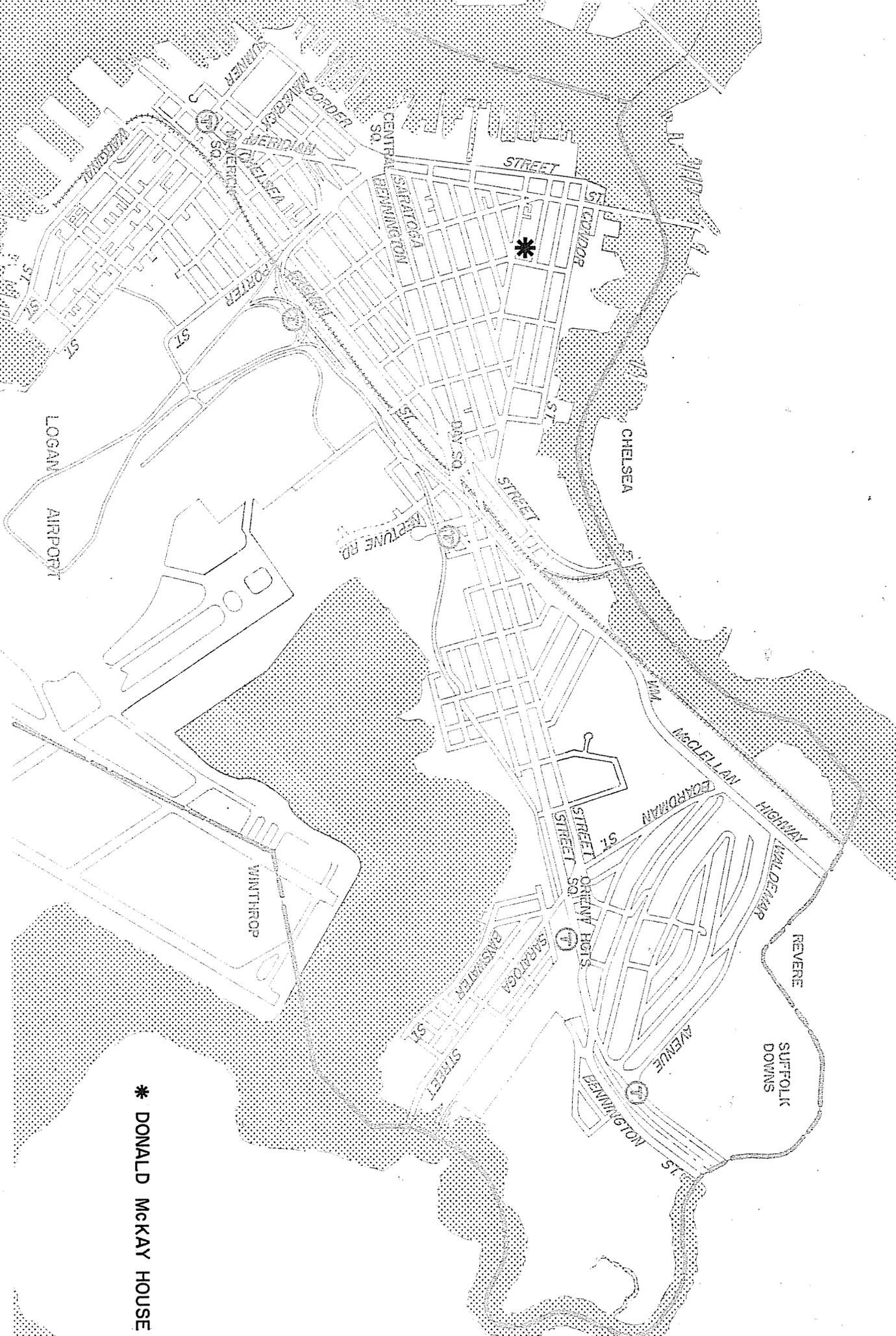
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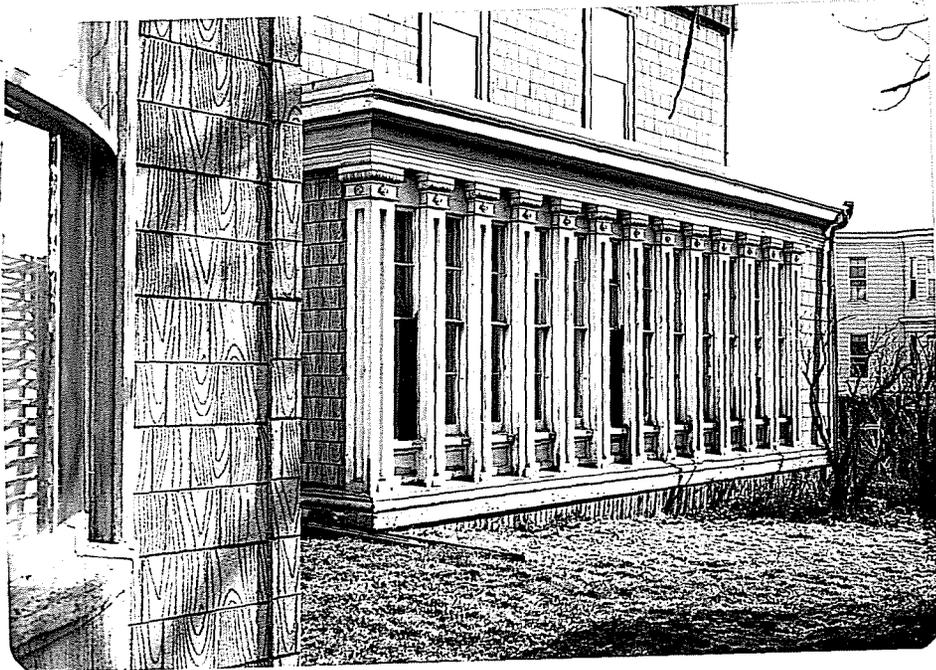
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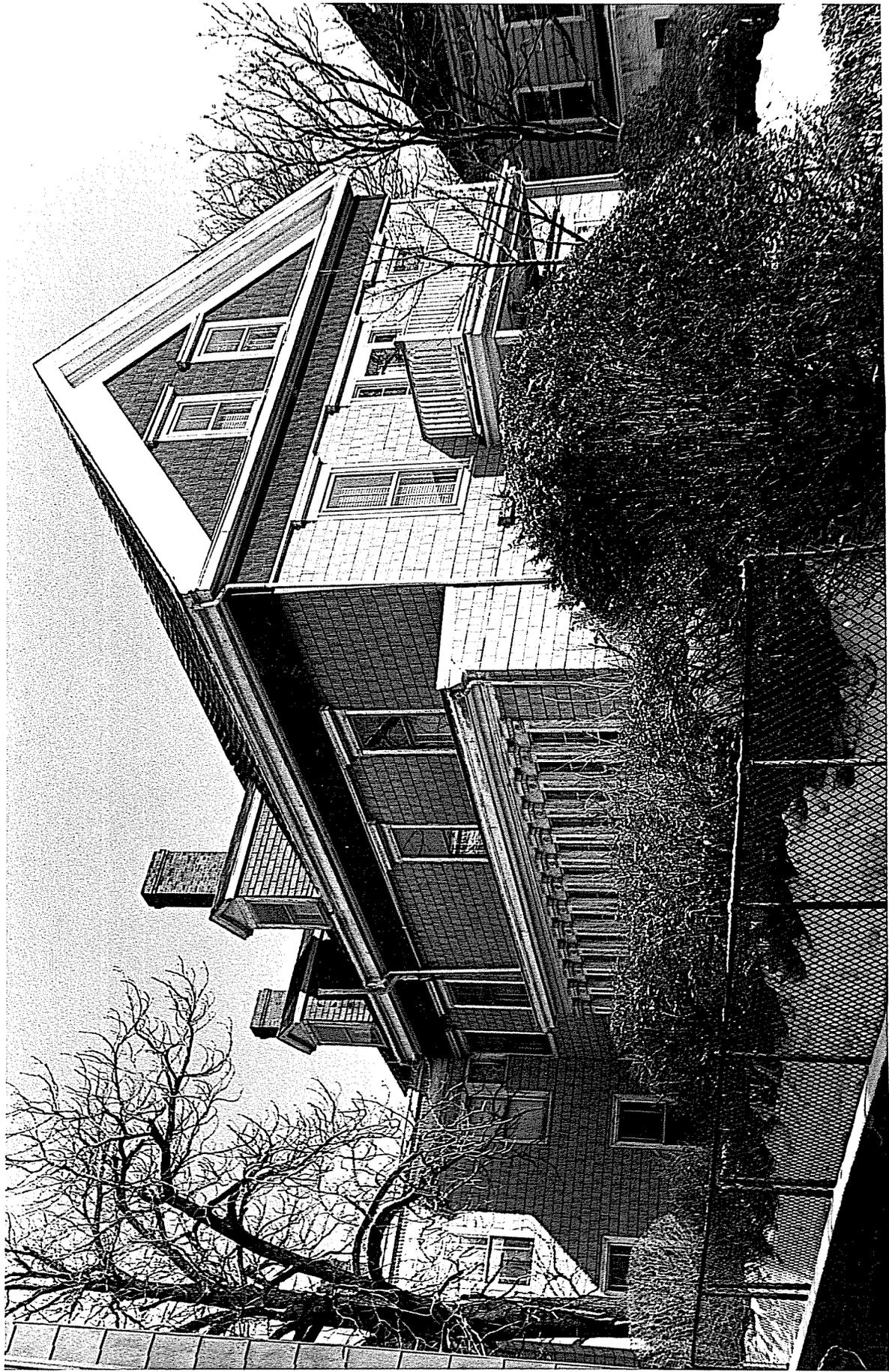
* DONALD MCKAY HOUSE



The Donald McKay House, 78-80 White Street, East Boston

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DONALD MCKAY HOUSE

1.0 LOCATION OF THE PROPERTY

1.1 Address: 78-80 White Street, East Boston; Ward I. The assessors parcel number is 61090.

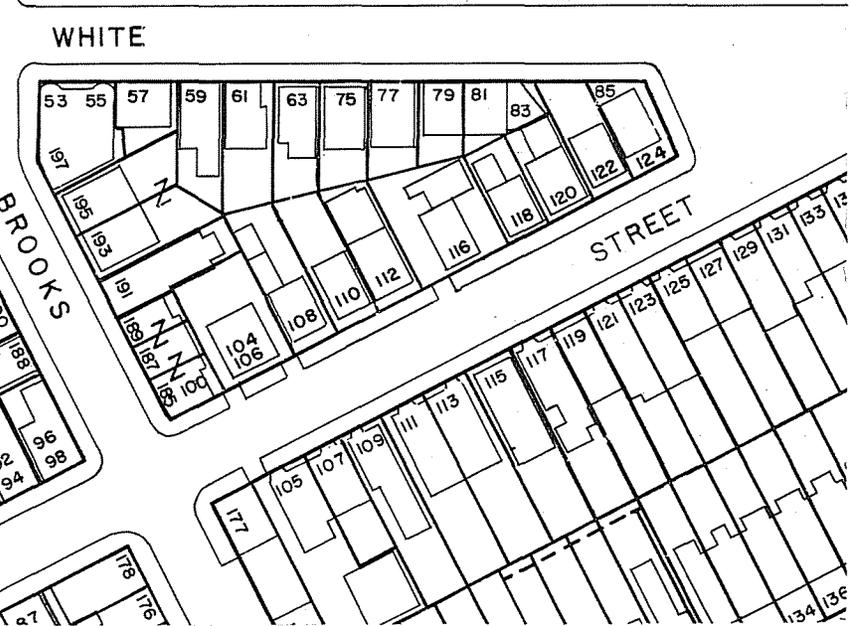
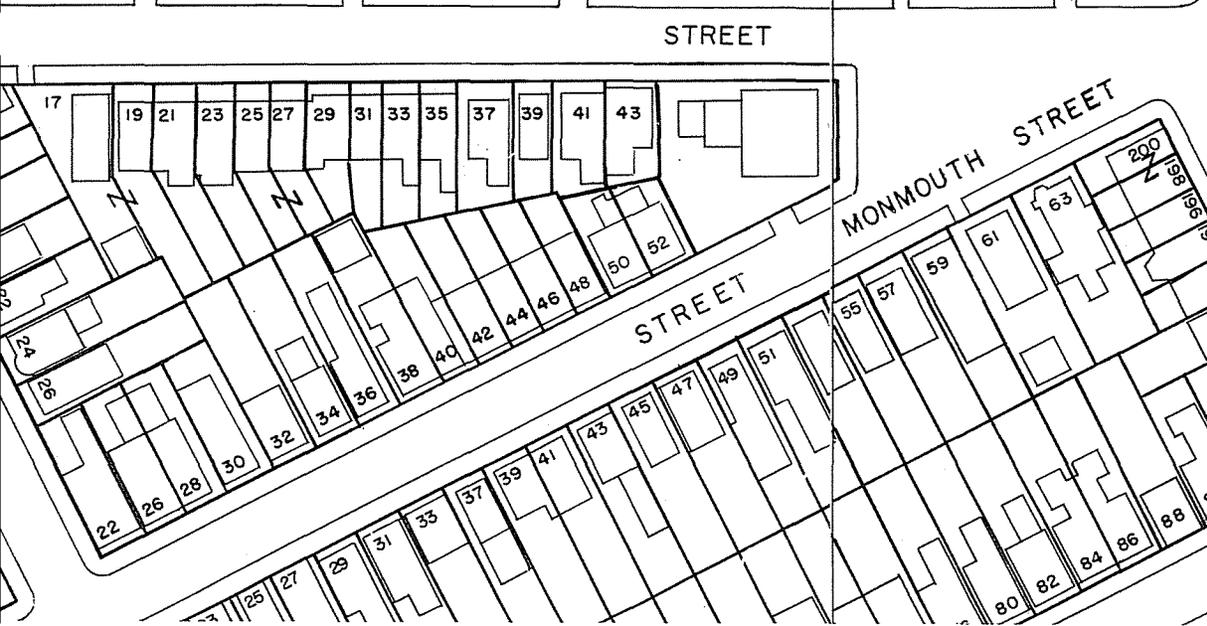
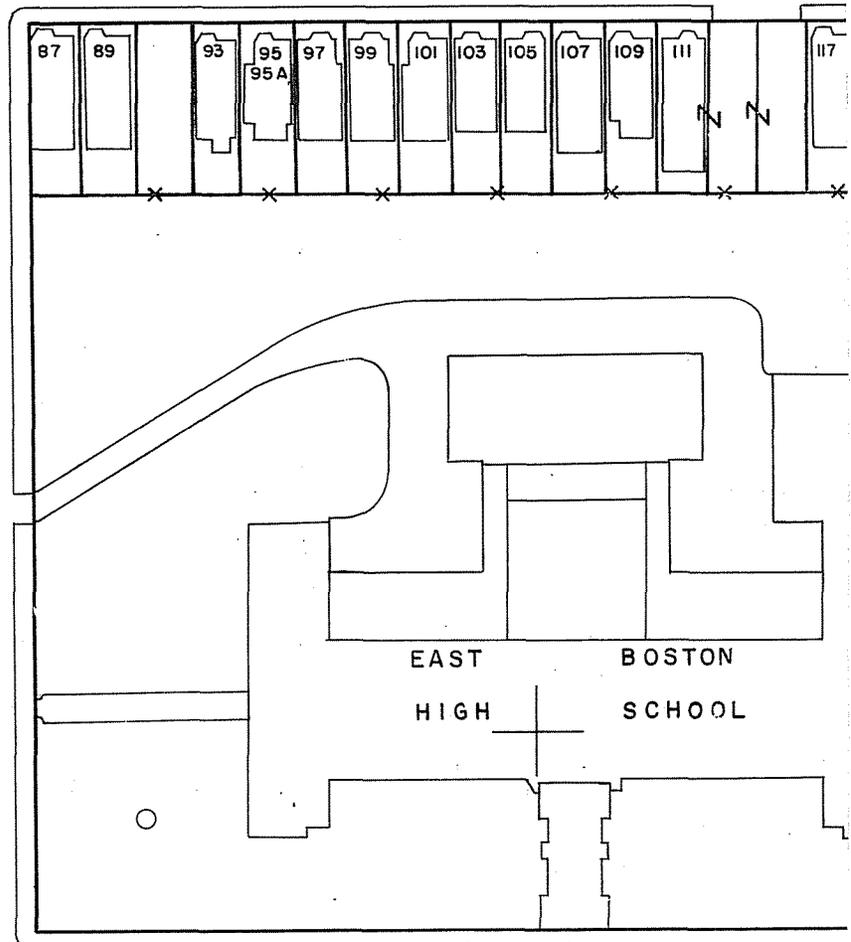
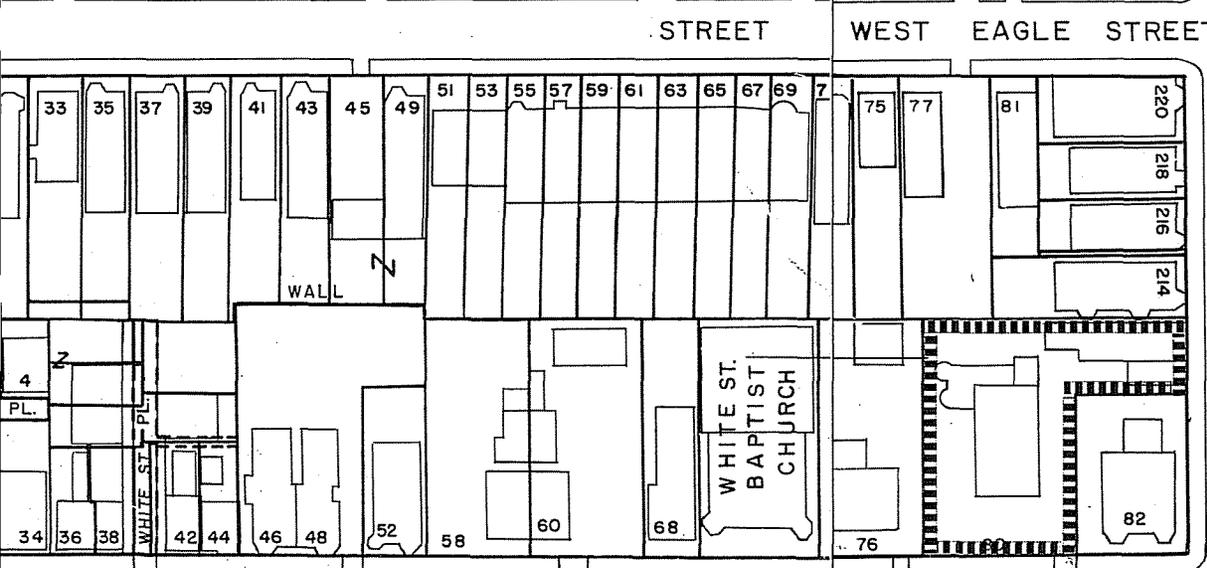
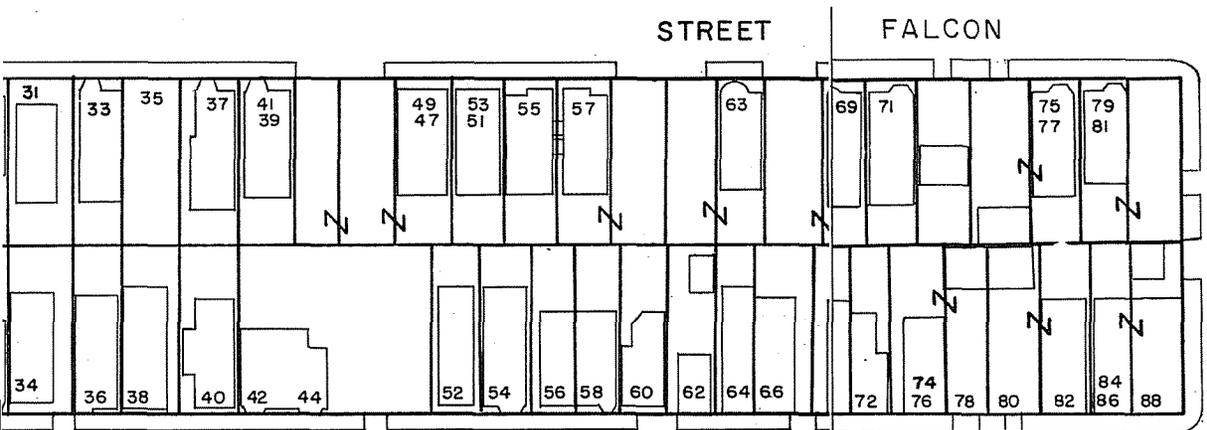
1.2 Area in Which the Property is Located:

The Donald McKay House is located in the Eagle Hill section of East Boston. The hill, a glacial drumlin, constituted the original land area of East Boston, which was known as "Nodddle's Island." Built up during the middle to late nineteenth century, the area is generally characterized by triple deckers interspersed with Victorian houses designed as single family dwellings. The neighborhood is unusually stable socially, comprised in many cases of families who have occupied the same houses for several generations.

The Eagle Hill section is roughly triangular in shape, bounded by Border Street at the edge of the Inner Harbor, Condor Street along Chelsea Creek and Saratoga and Bennington Streets connecting Central and Day Squares. The McKay House is almost at the center of the Eagle Hill area at the convergence of White and Monmouth Streets. It is at the top of the hill facing South towards the harbor.

1.3 Map showing location:

Attached.



2.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPERTY

2.1 Type and Use:

The property, which occupies less than one acre (12,400 sq. ft.), is residential in type. Built by Donald McKay in 1844 for use as a single family house, it is currently under three family occupancy. It is owned by Ralph P. and Pauline Ventuccia.

2.2 General Description:

The Greek Revival style McKay house is a two story plus attic, 3 by 5 bay detached frame dwelling. It has a shingled, ridged roof with the gable end fronting on the street in a manner typical of this style. The gable has a full entablature with the bold, wide profile also typical of Greek Revival design.

On the front facade a central entrance porch with two posts supports a second story balcony with a plain balustrade. This projects around a center window flanked by sidelights. The lateral windows flanking the entrance on the first floor are wider than those directly above them which are of slightly more elongated proportions. A pair of windows, shorter than those below, is located in the gable end. All windows on the front and on the east elevation are 2-over-2 double-hung sash as are most of the other windows on the house. Moulded window enframements are all the same on the original portion of the house. Also of this design is the enframement for the center entrance door. Two vertical members, each resembling a pilaster, are capped by a pronounced lintel which clearly shows its design derivation from the frieze and cornice of a Greek temple. In fact, the enframement design may have been taken from one of the builder's handbooks available in 1844. These handbooks provided drawings and specifications based largely on Greek temple design for use by the local builder or potential homeowner, such as McKay, interested in designing his own house.

An architectural handbook may also have been the source for the flat-roofed porch which McKay added along the west side of his house. Thirteen columns, allegedly in honor of the thirteen colonies, support an entablature composed of a fasciaed architrave, a plain frieze and a projecting, moulded cornice. The columns are square with a recessed panel in each plane. The necking of the capitals is embellished with a rosette, presumably in all four planes although these are now only partially visible. An echinus of an egg-and-dart motif serves as a transitional element between the necking and a plain abacus, moulded at the top, on which rests the architrave. The porch has at some time been closed in and windows have been inserted between the columns.

Of a later date than the house itself is the two-story Italianate bay with dentilated cornice and flat roof which has been added on the west side of the house beyond the Greek Revival porch. The addition starts just at the enframing of the fourth window in the original wall and itself has five windows, curving into the plane of the bay, on each floor. Also later are the two dormer windows in each roof plan and an addition at the back of the house.

There are two chimneys in each original roof plane and one on the bay.

The McKay house appears to be in good condition although it is now entirely shingled with asphalt leaving in doubt the actual condition of original exterior materials.

The house is centrally located within the larger portion of the L-shaped lot. The front lawn slopes down to end in a moderately high granite parapet retaining wall which is built into the angle of Eagle Hill at the front and on both sides. Two openings have been cut in the parapet wall. One, framed at sidewalk level by two granite posts with tapered tops, leads up in steps to the center entrance. From the second, eight steps lead up to a walkway which then angles to the front entrance. A carefully clipped hedge frames the front lawn and the central, stepped walkway. Other shrubbery, as well as large trees to the sides and back of the property, gracefully accommodate the McKay House to its setting.

A two-story, wood frame barn of nineteenth century origin, possibly from McKay's tenure, is located on the smaller portion of the lot, abutting Brooks Street.

2.3 Photograph: Attached.

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY

3.1 Historic Associations

The significance of the house at 78-80 White Street lies primarily in its association with Donald McKay, a nineteenth century ship-builder who was a major influence on the development of international maritime design and engineering. McKay was also the dominant personality contributing to the growth of East Boston and was a major factor in the economic prosperity of the city as a whole.

McKay, a Canadian by birth, moved to East Boston in 1843. Then thirty-four years old, McKay had completed his apprenticeship and had joined a shipbuilding partnership in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Through the auspices of Enoch Train, a wealthy Boston merchant, McKay opened his own shipyard on Border Street between White and Eutaw Streets. Until 1850, he designed packet vessels, the dominant sailing ship type preceding the clipper. With the launching of the "Staghound" in 1850, McKay began his career of building clipper ships. In all, thirty clipper ships were designed and built by McKay in his Border Street shipyard.

Most notable was the "Flying Cloud", built in 1851, which was and is internationally famous for making the passage from New York to San Francisco, around the tip of South America, in only 89 days. In making this trip, she is reported to have attained the fastest rate of speed ever logged - a record which stood for 23 years, even at a time when mechanically driven ships were being developed.

Throughout the 1850's and into the 1860's, until the California Gold Rush subsided and the Civil War ended, McKay produced some of the largest, fastest and most beautiful sailing ships in the world. Bustling with shipbuilding activity and the industries required to outfit sailing ships, the East Boston waterfront drew skilled craftsmen from all over New England and Canada and offered jobs as well for unskilled laborers. The townscape of East Boston adjusted to accommodate this new population.

McKay built his own house in 1844, before the building boom he helped generate, and lived there with his family until 1877. During his years at White Street, McKay entertained many famous citizens, including Admiral Farragut, Daniel Webster, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who came to celebrate the launching of new clipper ships.

3.2 Architectural Significance

Donald McKay's house is a good example of vernacular architecture in the Greek Revival style. Its most unusual and distinctive feature is the columned side porch. It is not known whether McKay designed

the porch himself, possibly with the aid of a builder's handbook, or whether he had assistance. Characteristic of the Greek Revival style (1820-1860) is the alignment of the house with the broad gable end facing the street. Also typical are the proportions of the house, the symmetrical disposition of doors and windows, and the decorative mouldings.

The significance of the McKay house has been recognized through the Boston 200 bicentennial marker program. A commemorative plaque describing the importance of the house is mounted on the parapet wall in front of the house.

3.3 Relationship to the Criteria for Landmark Designation:

The Donald McKay House clearly meets the criteria for Landmark designation established by Section 4 of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975 in that it is a structure which is associated significantly with the life of an outstanding historic personage. It also fulfills the definition of "Landmark" in being an improvement which has historical significance to the city, the Commonwealth, the Region or the Nation. (In this case, both the Region and the Nation.)

4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

The assessed value of the McKay House is \$8,000 total (\$2,500 for the land and \$5,500 for the building).

The occupancy of the house appears to be stable.

5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

5.1 Background:

An agricultural area for two hundred years and then a summer resort, East Boston boomed as a shipping and shipbuilding center during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to Donald McKay's shipyards, East Boston prospered as the Boston terminal for England's Cunard Lines. The addition of the Grand Junction Railroad gave East Boston direct connections to the manufacturing centers of New England. The population swelled from 1,455 persons in 1840 to 20,572 in 1865.

The decline of wooden shipbuilding caused the exodus of skilled craftsmen from East Boston at a time when Irish immigrants were arriving. Successive waves of immigrants, first Jews and then Italians, pushed the population of East Boston to a peak level of 60,000 which was maintained from 1916 through 1935. From 1940 to 1970, the population declined in East Boston as a result of factors affecting most urban communities.

With its population reduced to approximately 39,000 and just recently beginning to increase again, East Boston today is a stable community. Most residents (91%) live in family groups and there are slightly fewer elderly and slightly more children than the rest of the city. The median family income in East Boston was somewhat less than the City in 1970. Statistics also indicate that the youth of the area receive less education in terms of years spent in school and therefore have less access to the professional, technical, clerical and service jobs which are increasing most rapidly in the Boston economy.

The physical development of East Boston occurred almost entirely within the period 1835-1915. Some of the mansions built when the area was a summer resort still exist, along with the large "sub-urban" houses built during the heyday of the clipper ships. Tenements built to house the immigrant families are also found in abundance. Only 12% of the dwellings in East Boston were built after 1939.

Major physical changes to the area since 1915 have related to transportation facilities, particularly the tunnels to Downtown Boston, the McClellan Highway, and the airport. The rapid expansion of the latter facility has been one of the most critical issues facing the East Boston community in recent years.

5.2 Current Planning Issues:

In its Fall, 1976 report entitled "East Boston, District Profile and Proposed 1977-79 Neighborhood Improvement Program," the Boston Redevelopment Authority identifies the following major planning issues affecting East Boston:

- 1) Negative influences on the quality of residential neighborhoods.
- 2) Decline of neighborhood commercial centers.
- 3) Negative impacts of noise, air pollution and congestion caused by regional transportation systems.
- 4) Control of new development - particularly along the waterfront and on the boundaries of the airport.
- 5) Protection of natural resources - especially the wetlands, marshes and scenic areas in the district.

Most important, according to the B.R.A., is the need to protect and enhance residential neighborhoods. The age and deferral of needed repairs have led to the deterioration of much of the housing stock. There is lack of variety of housing options. Old and new industries threaten to further disrupt neighborhoods.

Responding to these needs, the City proposes to upgrade housing stock through the Housing Improvement Program which provides rebates for private investment by owner occupants and, as necessary, to use demolition or code enforcement in severe problem cases. Neighborhood confidence is to be promoted by public improvements such as lighting, tree planting and a program to clean up vacant lots.

The Donald McKay house is in an area more stable than some of the East Boston's neighborhoods. Less than 40% of the units in the Eagle Hill section are in need of substantial repair. Nevertheless, there is a need to keep neighborhood confidence high and to encourage private investment in the area. The area is zoned R-8.

6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

As a result of its historic associations, the Donald McKay house is preeminent in East Boston and satisfies the criteria for Landmark designation by the Boston Landmarks Commission. Such a designation would mean that future physical changes to the property, whether by city, state, or private action would have to be reviewed and approved by the Boston Landmarks Commission. Landmark designation would provide a high degree of protection for this historic resource.

An alternative approach would be to nominate the property to the National Register of Historic Places. This would have the effect of providing some measure of protection from Federal action but not city, state, or private action. It would also make the property eligible for Federal tax benefits and, possibly, grants for preservation activities.

Architecturally and visually, the McKay house is part of an interesting, fairly cohesive district formed around the intersection of White and Monmouth Streets. A study committee might conclude that, in order to protect the relationships existing among the buildings within that district, the Commission should designate the area in one of its district categories.

While clearly eligible, the McKay house could remain undesignated for other reasons.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission recommend that the Donald McKay house be designated as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, that the property be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and that a study committee be formed to investigate the appropriateness of designating a contiguous area as an Architectural Conservation District or Protection Area.

The boundaries of the Landmark designation should conform to the parcel of land known as assessors parcel 61090, owned at this time by Ralph P. and Pauline Ventuccia.

The standards and criteria recommended for administering the regulatory functions provided for in Chapter 772 are attached.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT ON STANDARDS AND CRITERIA

Boston Landmarks Commission

Per Sections 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the enabling statute (Chapter 772 of the General Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for 1975), Standards and Criteria must be adopted for each Landmark Designation which shall be applied by the Commission in evaluating proposed changes to the property. Before a Certificate of Design Approval or Certificate of Exemption can be issued for such changes, the changes must be reviewed by the Commission with regard to their conformance to the purposes of the statute.

The Standards and Criteria established thus note those features which must be conserved and/or enhanced to maintain the viability of the Landmark Designation. The intent of these guidelines is to help local officials, designers, and individual property owners to identify the characteristics that have led to designation, and thus to identify the limitation to the changes that can be made to them.

It should be emphasized that conformance to the Standards and Criteria alone does not necessarily insure approval, nor are they absolute, but any request for variance from them must demonstrate the reasons for, and advantages gained by, such variance. The Commission's Certificate of Design Approval is only granted after careful review of each application and public hearing, in accordance with the statute.

As intended by the statute a wide variety of buildings and features are included within the area open to Landmark Designation, and an equally wide range exists in the latitude allowed for change. Some properties of truly exceptional architectural and/or historical value will permit only the most minor modifications, while for some others the Commission encourages changes and additions with a contemporary approach, consistent with the properties' existing features and changed uses.

In general, the intent of the Standards and Criteria is to preserve existing qualities that cause designation of a property; however, in some cases they have been so structured as to encourage the removal of additions that have lessened the integrity of the property.

It is recognized that changes will be required in designated properties for a wide variety of reasons, all of which are not under the complete control of the Commission or the owners. Primary examples are:

- a) Building code conformance and safety requirements.
- b) Changes necessitated by the introduction of modern mechanical and electrical systems.
- c) Changes due to proposed new uses of a property.

The response to these requirements may, in some cases, present conflicts with the Standards and Criteria for a particular property. The Commission's evaluation of an application will be based upon the degree to which such changes are in harmony with the character of the property.

In some cases, priorities have been assigned within the Standards and Criteria as an aid to property owners in identifying the most critical design features.

The Standards and Criteria have been divided into two levels: (1) those general ones that are common to almost all landmark designations (with three different categories for buildings, building interiors and landscape features); and (2) those specific ones that apply to each particular property that is designated. In every case the Specific Standards and Criteria for a particular property shall take precedence over the General ones if there is a conflict.

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GENERAL STANDARDS AND CRITERIA FOR BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES
DESIGNATED AS LANDMARKS by the Boston Landmarks Commission

A. APPROACH

1. The design approach to the property should begin with the premise that the features of historical and architectural significance described within the Study Report must be preserved. In general this will minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.
2. Changes and additions to the property and its environment which have taken place in the course of time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have developed significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected. ("Later integral features" shall be the term used to convey this concept.)
3. Deteriorated material or architectural features, whenever possible, should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.
4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of original or later integral features.
5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. Imitation replacement materials are not allowed.
6. New additions or alterations should not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the property and should be compatible with the size, scale, color, material and character of the property and its environment.
7. New additions should be contemporary in design, not imitative of an earlier style or period.

E. PORCHES, STEPS AND EXTERIOR ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

1. Retain and repair porches and steps that are original or later integral features including such items as railings, balusters, columns, posts, brackets, roofs, ironwork, benches, fountains, statues and decorative items.

F. SIGNS, MARQUEES AND AWNINGS

1. Signs, marquees and awnings integral to the building ornamentation or architectural detailing shall be retained and repaired where necessary.
2. New signs, marquees and awnings shall not detract from the essential form of the building nor obscure its architectural features.
3. New signs, marquees and awnings shall be of a size and material compatible with the building and its current use.
4. Signs, marquees and awnings applied to the building shall be applied in such a way that they could be removed without damaging the building.
5. All signs added to the building shall be part of one system of design, or reflect a design concept appropriate to the communication intent.
6. Lettering forms or typeface will be evaluated for the specific use intended, but generally shall either be contemporary or relate to the period of the building or its later integral features.
7. Lighting of signs will be evaluated for the specific use intended, but generally illumination of a sign shall not dominate illumination of the building.
8. The foregoing notwithstanding, signs are viewed as the most appropriate vehicle for imaginative and creative expression, especially in structures being reused for purposes different from the original, and it is not the Commission's intent to stifle a creative approach to signage.

G PENTHOUSES

1. The objective of preserving the integrity of the original or later integral roof shape shall provide the basic criteria in judging whether a penthouse can be added to a roof. Height of a building, prominence of roof form, and visibility shall govern whether a penthouse shall be approved.
2. Minimizing or eliminating the visual impact of the penthouse is the general objective and the following guidelines shall be followed:
 - a) Location shall be selected where the penthouse is not visible from the street or adjacent buildings; set-backs shall be utilized.
 - b) Overall height or other dimensions shall be kept to a point where the penthouse is not seen from the street or adjacent buildings.
 - c) Exterior treatment shall relate to the materials, color and texture of the building or to other materials integral to the period and character of the building, typically used for appendages.
 - d) Openings in a penthouse shall relate to the building in proportion, type and size of opening, wherever visually apparent.

H LANDSCAPE FEATURES

1. The general intent is to preserve the existing or later integral landscape features that enhance the landmark property.
2. It is recognized that often the environment surrounding the property has a character, scale and street pattern quite different from that existing when the building was constructed. Thus, changes must frequently be made to accommodate the new condition, and the landscape treatment can be seen as a transition feature between the landmark and its newer surroundings.

- c) New lighting fixtures which are contemporary in design, and which illuminate the exterior of the building in a way which renders it visible at night and compatible with its environment.
4. If a fixture is to be replaced, the new exterior lighting shall be located where intended in the original design. If supplementary lighting is added, the new location shall fulfill the functional intent of the current use without obscuring the building form or architectural detailing.

J. REMOVAL OF LATER ADDITIONS AND ALTERATIONS

- 1. Each property will be separately studied to determine if later additions and alterations can, or should, be removed. It is not possible to provide one general guideline.
- 2. Factors that will be considered include:
 - a) Compatibility with the original property's integrity in scale, materials and character.
 - b) Historic association with the property.
 - c) Quality in the design and execution of the addition.
 - d) Functional usefulness.

Boston Landmarks Commission
Designation Committee

Specific Standards and Criteria

Donald McKay's House
78-80 White Street
East Boston, Massachusetts 02128

A. General

1. The designation of this property is based more on the importance of the man who built it and lived within it than on the architectural importance of the structure. It, however, exhibits well the Greek Revival style in which it was built, marred mainly by the later application of new wall materials.
2. The general intent with this building should be to make no further violation of the basic integrity of the house and try gradually to restore the original details and materials.
3. As the primary public views of the house are from White Street the most attention should be given to the front elevation facing south.

B. Walls

1. When any work is done on the exterior walls, the intent should be to remove the existing asphalt shingles and restore and/or replace the original smooth wood clapboards.
2. When any exterior work is being done investigation should be made to see if the building originally has corner pilasters. If so, they should be replaced.

Donald McKay's House

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3. Windows should not be added or removed and should only be modified to bring closer to standard Greek Revival detailing.
4. Exterior paint should match original color, if it can be determined; or, be from a typical Greek Revival palette, if the original cannot be determined.

C. Roof

1. The roof shape should be retained, but the four dormers can be removed, unless it can be determined that they are original.

D. Porches

1. The west porch, with the thirteen columns representing the thirteen original colonies should be retained. It may be opened, as it probably was originally, or kept enclosed as it is now.
2. The front porch should be retained unless it can be shown to be a later addition.

E. Additions

1. The existing addition on the northwest corner of the building may be retained, although it was not original, as its recessed location does only minor harm to the original building.