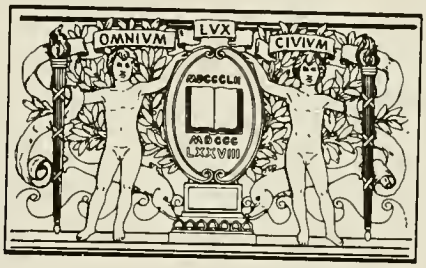

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A full package will be submitted later

Bob

FREDERICK DOUGLASS SQUARE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Précis

The Frederick Douglass Square Historic District in lower Roxbury is bounded by Tremont, Cabot, Warwick, Windsor, Westminster and Hammond Streets.

Located at the junction of Tremont, Hammond and Cabot Streets, FREDERICK DOUGLASS SQUARE was dedicated on February 14, 1917, in honor of the centenary of the famous black abolitionist's birth. Here Douglass is said to have spoken - as he so often did - to open-air meetings about the plight of slaves in America. The use of what abolitionists came to call "The Square" as a forum for political rallies, protest meetings and public celebrations is a tradition which continues to this day. Those who have spoken or appeared in the square include William Munroe Trotter - publisher of Boston's first black newspaper once located at 977 Tremont Street opposite the square - Mayor James Curley, Senator Edward Brooke, Senator Edward Kennedy, Coretta King, Duke Ellington, Dinah Washington, and Tiny Bradshaw.

The oldest building in the district (ca. 1860) today houses - as it has for forty years - the Douglass Square Pharmacy; it was originally a grocery store owned by the Thomas Fay family, a use which concealed its activities as a station on the underground railroad. Slave tunnels are believed still to exist in the area around the square.

The streets to the southeast of the square are occupied by the remnants of the residential community of brick row houses and apartments developed on a large tract of low-lying marshy land beginning in 1871 by the Tremont Improvement Company; the improvement company's lands were bounded by Ruggles, Shawmut, Kendell and Cabot Streets. Madison Park was its most prestigious address and the houses fronting on it - subject to the restriction imposed by the development company - featured mansard roofs, stone facades, bow fronts and high stoops. The former family hotel located at 64 Hammond Street still suggests the elegance of the houses which once faced the park. The brick mansard row on Windsor Street (71-73-75) reflects the more modest houses built on streets without a park address. This entire area of lower Roxbury once represented the coda - stylistically, chronologically and geographically - to the building history of Boston's South End.

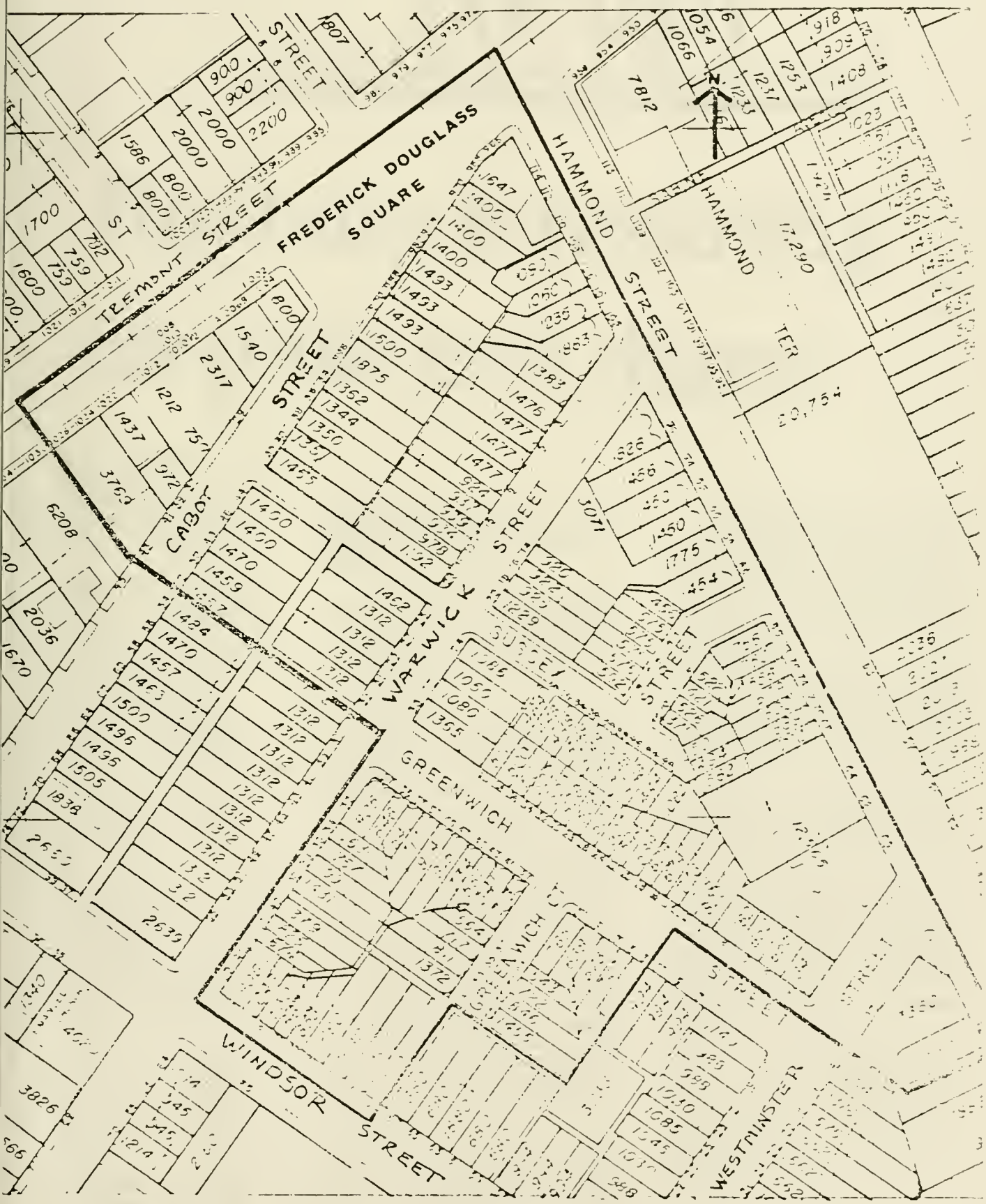
The historic district lies at the northern edge of the development area and was the last to be completely built up. Although Robert Treat Paine first acquired property here in 1874 and had constructed the row at 90-96 Hammond Street - noteworthy for its faceted bows and the elongated proportions of its door and windows - his construction of philanthropic workers' housing here did not occur until the late 1880's and early 90's, by which time the development company's restrictions were no longer effectively enforced.

One historian's description of Paine's housing as "cramped" and "mean" seems most applicable to the Sussex Street rows, a scale determined to some degree by their location within a block. Although diminutive if compared to the South End norm, Paine's other rows on Warwick, Greenwich, Greenwich Court and Hammond are somewhat more generously scaled; monotony is avoided by variations in ornamentation and exterior detailing. Greenwich Street, particularly, by virtue of its ample width dispels the sense of "cramped and mean" and suggests that Paine did in fact achieve "ideal" workers' housing within an urban context as well as in the more highly praised "suburban" setting on Roundhill and Sunnyside Streets in Jamaica Plain.

The demolition of virtually all of lower Roxbury, a black community since the late 19th century, in the name of slum clearance and to accomodate I-95, endows this small section which remains with exceptional historical importance.

Proposed

FREDERICK DOUGLASS SQUARE HISTORIC DISTRICT



Boston Herald American — Thursday, September 7, 1978

save

Forum

A free exchange of ideas on the issues of the day

Roxbury is restoring its pride and charm

By WILLIAM J. LEWIS
Senior Editor

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s justifiably are proud.

superior is the quality of the
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ouse counterparts on Beacon
nd in Back Bay and Bay Vil-

complished mostly with their
avings or borrowed funds, the
owners have performed the
with painstaking care and dedication. Even the most casual passerby must recognize the transformation from slum dwelling to residence of distinction.

The exterior brickwork is blasted clean and neatly repointed.

Ornamental ironwork is lavishly restored — in some cases added — to lend character to the facade or stone stairway.

Freshly painted and gaily planted windowboxes exude their color and charm for all the neighborhood to enjoy.

Bay windows, precisely restored, project an air of gentle living that pervades this community.

But the residents here in Lower Roxbury are neither Brahmins nor affluent businessmen. They are simple working people whose pride and persistence has led them to create an urban oasis within an area brought to its knees by the twin scourges of poverty and vandalism.

As a consequence of the initiative and determination demonstrated within this enclave, the total neighborhood is slowly beginning to restore reclaimable housing stock wherever possible and construct new residences as well.

The community effort having been recognized as serious and resolved, the municipal administration is working hand in hand with neighborhood groups as well as individuals to restore this blighted area.

In fact, it is the city's Real Property Department under Commissioner Joanne A. Prevost that is in large measure responsible for the revival being experienced in this tiny urban village comprised of Warwick, Sussex, Greenwich and Hammond Sts.

The agency's policy of clearing its rolls of tax-foreclosed properties as expeditiously as possible is paying dividends not only in Lower Roxbury but across the face of the city.

Where in prior years the prescribed cure-all for distressed property taken in tax title by the city was "demolition," today's approach is "rehabilitation."

In many instances, of course, a building is too far gone for rehabilitation and its razing is inescapable. However, if a property is structurally sound, in most cases it can be restored to embark on a second useful life.

Although the Lower Roxbury "rehab" development obviously brings her singular satisfaction, Ms. Prevost points with undisguised pride to other such projects in Roxbury, Dorchester, South Boston, East Boston, Charlestown and Jamaica Plain.

BOSTON HERALD - AMERICAN - September

There is the three-story brick partment on Roxbury St. which d but a single tenant when its le drew $16,500 for the municipal easury at public auction. Today e thoroughly-renovated building home to a dozen families living in commodations of high standard.

Across the city in East Boston, of the 12 housing units that sold auction in the past year or so ve been well rehabilitated and re-rned to market where demand for ving accommodations far out-eighs supply.

A partially burned-out 19th cen-ry residence at Walnut Ave. and onroe St. in Roxbury is still anoth-example of creative restoration. oday this stately structure, a rought iron fence enclosing an undant garden, is home for three milies.

Pleasant and Savin Sts. in Dor-hester are sites of still more "re-ab" projects that produced highly-esirable homes in a district once rely depressed and now climbing ack.

But while homes have top prior-y in the city's plans, the re-crea-on of business enterprises is not eing disregarded.

Well aware that businesses pro-de jobs and services for inner-city vellers, Ms. Prevost noted her de-artment encourages the reclamation of commercial buildings taken by the city for non-payment of taxes.

At 814 Shawmut Ave. a busy auto shop is observed. Hardly more than a year ago this flourishing establishment was an abandoned hulk of concrete and cinderblock on its way to deteriorating into a pile of rubble.

Instead of sitting idly by and watching vandals take their toll, said Tom Gately, administrative assistant to the commissioner, "We put the building up for auction and as a result put a man in business."

Further out in Roxbury on the crest of Mission Hill stand two more testimonials to the argument for rehabilitation. One is an immaculately-restored professional building. The other is a spotlessly-remodeled commercial-residential structure with bustling retail shops on the street level and two stories of apartments above.

While there is much personal satisfaction as well as monetary gain to be realized from rehabilitation of these distressed properties, a resolute dedication is required to achieve one's goal.

Scavengers, some professional thieves and other youthful vandals, all too often discourage those who strive to reclaim real esate in many neighborhoods. Some projects are abandoned when renovators discover that overnight they are victimized by thieves or vandals.

But despite the setbacks, progress stubbornly persists. Almost every week Ms. Prevost and her staff auction a number of parcels — some buildings, some vacant land.

In order to prevent slumlords from avoiding their tax obligations by resorting to the device of having their straws purchase properties taken by the city, Ms. Prevost requires buyers to sign a statement under the penalties of perjury they are making the acquisition in their behalf only.

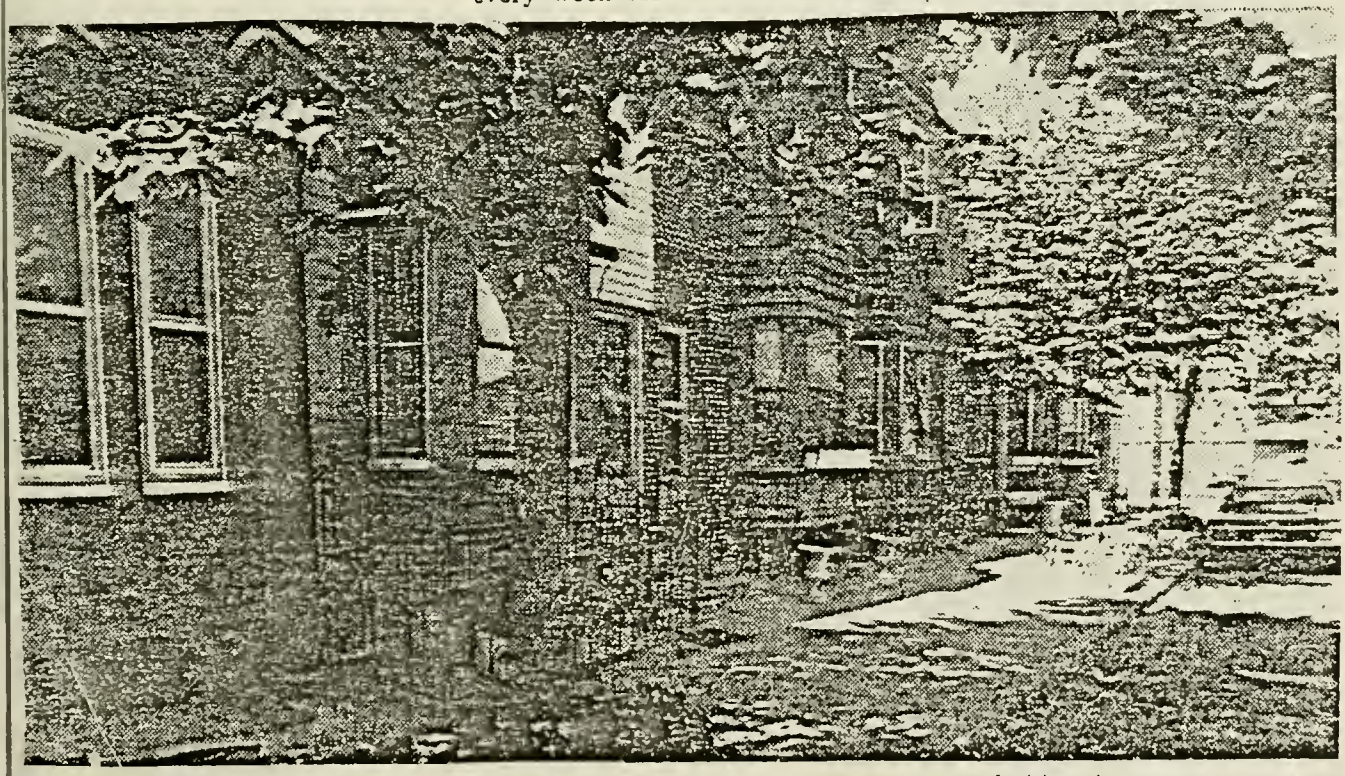
She further requires that within a "reasonable" period of time, the purchaser will proceed with rehabilitation of the property.

These provisos, the commissioner insists upon, appear not only to be restoring foreclosed properties to the tax rolls but are responsible for an evident reversal of a pattern of declining value of housing stock in many sections of Boston.

Of the 347 buildings of various types sold at public auction by the Real Property Department in the years 1975-1977, statistics compiled by Deputy Commissioner Tom DeRosa demonstrate that 40 percent of these properties exhibit exterior improvements.

Since most rehabilitation work begins with interior improvements, it is safe to say that a far heavier percentage of these structures are in one stage or another of reclamation.

Ms. Prevost, who was named to her post by Mayor White in 1975, expressed confidence that the rehabilitation process will pick up even more steam when evidences of neighborhood stabilization and improvement become incontestable.



Greenwich St. in Lower Roxbury, a prime example of rehabilitation of some of oldest houses.

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