

Preliminary Study Report
on the Establishment of the
Thaddeus Frost House Local Historic District



291 Brighton Street, current view 2017

Belmont, Massachusetts

October 10, 2017

SUMMARY SHEET

Report Preparation:

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Study Committee:

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Date of Public Hearing: On or about January 9, 2018

Date of Town Meeting: Spring 2018 Town Meeting, date TBD

Total Number of Properties in Proposed District: 1

Conclusion:

The handsome Federal-style Thaddeus Frost House (ca. 1805) at 291 Brighton Street is historically significant for several reasons, and merits the enhanced protection that designation as a Local Historic District would give it. The house is one of the last surviving homes originally part of the many large farms in Belmont, which existed prior to the Town's incorporation in 1859 until the end of WW II. It belonged to several members of the Frost family, a large, extended group of Puritan pioneers, Revolutionary War veterans, Civil War Soldiers, and prosperous farmers who were important in Watertown, West Cambridge (Arlington, 1867), and Belmont. It is an iconic example of Federal period architecture that survives virtually unchanged, on what was once a major road for drovers taking their cattle to Boston markets. With significant development pressure in the metro West area, few of these houses remain today in Belmont. The Frost house still faces the street that has become a busy commuter route for those with jobs in Boston and Cambridge. In 1993, MHC gave a written opinion that the house was individually eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under criteria A and C. Article 15 of the General Laws of Belmont established the Historic District Commission (HDC) that authorizes the HDC to propose "additional historic districts and changes in historic districts," (15.4(c)) and it is under that authority the new district is proposed.

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THADDEUS FROST HOUSE LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

INTRODUCTION

The proposed Thaddeus Frost Local Historic District is comprised of a classic Federal-style farmhouse (ca. 1805) and large, quarter-acre lot owned by three generations of the same family. The house and large lot are all that remain of at least sixteen acres farmed from the 1820s to the 1940s, part of Belmont's once flourishing market garden industry.

A Local Historic District offers the strongest protection possible for the preservation of historic structures, landscapes, and community fabric. It provides a mechanism to manage change and avoid inappropriate alterations and demolition. Within a Local Historic District, any significant alterations to the exterior of a structure visible from a public way, park, or body of water are subject to the review of the Belmont Historical Commission in its role as the Belmont Historic District Commission. The first Local Historic Districts in Massachusetts were established in 1955 at Nantucket, and on Boston's Beacon Hill. Since then, over 670 districts have been established statewide and two in Belmont under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C.

The Belmont Historical Commission was created in 1968 under Section 8D, Chapter 40 of the General Laws of Massachusetts, known as the Local Historical Commission Act, which allows communities to establish historical commissions and advisory boards responsible for advising community government on all matters relating to historic preservation. The Belmont Historic District Commission was established in 1972 to implement the provisions of the Historic District Commission Act, Chapter 40C of the General Laws of Massachusetts, enabling legislation allowing communities to establish local historic districts. Today, the Belmont Historic District Commission also serves as the Belmont Historical Commission to address town-wide historic preservation issues.

Belmont's first historic district, the Wellington Historic District, initially consisted of two residences on Pleasant Street (641 and 631 Pleasant Street) and was later expanded and renamed the Pleasant Street Historic District (PHD). It is both a National Register Historic District and a Local Historic District. The district runs along Pleasant Street from Stella Road to Snake Hill Road, and is approximately bounded on the north by Wellington Lane and on the south by Leonard Street. The Town Hall complex of buildings at the corner of Pleasant Street and Concord Avenue is also within the PHD. The Common Street Historic District includes the stone railway bridge over Concord Avenue, the War Memorial, and the Wellington Station. In 2010 Belmont's Comprehensive Plan recommended establishing additional local historic districts in town to preserve its unique character and in 2013 Town Meeting approved the Richardson Farm Local Historic District. The HDC reviews alterations to these districts following "Design Guidelines for Belmont Historic Districts" (December 2009), available from the town website, http://www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public_Documents/BelmontMA_BComm/HDCDesignGuidelines2009.pdf.

METHODOLOGY

Preservation Need

The proposed Thaddeus Frost House Local Historic District is located in Belmont's northeastern corner (Winn Brook neighborhood) a little more than four blocks south of State Route 2 and the Arlington border. The house faces Brighton Street, a heavily trafficked commuter route to Cambridge and Boston. It is bounded on the northwest by Arthur Road, on the northeast by Bradford Road, and on the southeast by Plymouth Avenue. The immediate neighborhood is residential, with post-World War II split levels and ranches. Brighton Street at its junction with Pleasant Street is all commercial, with hotels and convenience stores proposed for the corner in recent years, but now occupied by gas stations and other retail establishments.

Development pressure in Belmont continues to increase. Houses sell quickly. Owners often get multiple offers over their asking price, leading to bidding wars. Because the land a house sits on may be more valuable than the structure, many older homes are threatened. A few years ago the circa 1760 Thomas Clark House at 59 Common Street was moved from its site, while preservationists tried to find another location. Sadly, that effort failed and the house was demolished.

In an attempt to preserve this historic farmhouse, and prevent the demolition or insensitive alteration of its historically and architecturally significant features, the owner is seeking Local Historic District designation to best protect her property. There appears to be broad support in Belmont for historic preservation, evidenced by the recent establishment of the Richardson Farm Local Historic District, the CPA-funded update to the Town's Historic Resource Inventory, and the 2017 renewal and strengthening of the Demolition Delay Bylaw. Initiatives that originate from individual property owners, such as this proposed Local Historic District, are particularly well-received.

Creation of a Local Historic District will give the current and future owners of this house useful tools to manage change. A Local Historic District will prevent loss of the historic fabric of the property at 291 Brighton Street, and provide the Historic District Commission with the ability to review additional structures, additions, and other significant alterations to the exterior of the buildings and landscape features that are visible from public ways.

The Federal-style Thaddeus Frost house has architectural character and unique historical significance for Belmont, as a farmhouse whose surrounding acreage was one of the last to be subdivided for residential development in the town. Protecting this important piece of Belmont's history is a priority for the Historical Commission.

Report Documentation

Most of the research for this study report was done with primary sources available on Ancestry.com, including the U.S. Census, Massachusetts census, and vital records; as well as the grantee index at the Middlesex Registry of Deeds, local and regional newspapers, and records in Belmont's building department.

The second major source of primary materials was the extensive holdings of the Belmont Historical Society's Claflin Room in the Belmont Public Library. They include Belmont atlases; the contents of historic house and family files; town directories; and Belmont histories. The Robbins Library of Arlington, and the Watertown Free Public Library, provided additional material.

Secondary sources consulted include:

Belmont Citizen, October 31, 1941. Obituary of Cornelius Bresnan.

Belmont: The Architecture and Development of the Town of Homes (Belmont Historic District Commission, 1984).

Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860 (Tamara Plakins Thornton, 1989).

The Story of Belmont (Frances B. Baldwin, 1953).

The Streets of Belmont and How They Were Named (Richard B. Betts, published by the Belmont Historical Society, 1974; 2d ed. 2012).

Public Hearings and Town Meeting

The Belmont Historic District Commission will hold a public hearing on the proposed Thaddeus Frost House Local Historic District on or about January 9, 2018. The proposed local historic district will be considered at the spring 2018 Town Meeting.

SIGNIFICANCE

Historical Development of Belmont

Belmont's history as an independent entity does not begin in the early or mid-17th century, or even the Jacksonian years, but in the Civil War Era. It is the youngest of the fifty-four cities and towns in Middlesex County, and one of the newest in eastern Massachusetts. Belmont is distinguished architecturally, culturally, and economically from three earlier, neighboring towns because in the mid-19th century, many families acquired land specifically to create successful

commercial farms or market gardens; some of Belmont's quiet country estates also evolved into successful market gardens.

The land that is now Belmont was originally settled as parts of Newtowne (now Cambridge) and Watertown in the 1630s. This area was then part of Cambridge's far western frontier. Led by Sir Richard Saltonstall, the earliest settlers established in Watertown the first farming settlement in Massachusetts Bay. They built their church near the site of present day Watertown center. They were independent farmers who received grants of land from the English Crown.

Belmont is atypical in its origins. Most towns in colonial Massachusetts grew by splitting off from a larger, older town. The original 1637 land grant of Dedham now encompasses twelve other towns. All of the town of Acton came from a part of early Concord. Because of what modern Arlington historians call "home-rule pressure," a western portion of Cambridge was allowed to separate, and became West Cambridge in 1807. Residents distant from the town center resented required church attendance that was difficult in bad weather over poorly maintained roads, and often felt they did not get their fair share of services from the town to which they paid taxes. When separations occurred they could be relatively harmonious, but sometimes were not. A bitterly contested leave taking by outliers occasionally led to threats of violence, or a plea to the governor and legislature in Boston for intervention.

The founders of Belmont followed a less common path to incorporation. Like many neighboring towns to the west, Belmont was a "made town," but unusual because of how late it was created, from two, much older and larger towns, Watertown (1630), and Waltham (1738), and a small sliver of West Cambridge (Arlington since 1867). The men behind Belmont's incorporation were mostly gentlemen with country estates, and prosperous farmers. Like outliers in more typical towns, they complained of high taxes and a disproportionately low share of town services from the adjacent communities they were then part of. The legislature rejected their first bid for independence in 1854. They were denied in each of the next four years. Critics said the Belmontians were trying to avoid taxes, and that their proposed town lacked a blacksmith, public hall, or even a church. The last accusation was true, but quickly remedied by public spirited locals who created a Congregational gathering that first met in a building used as a proposed town hall.

In 1859 the Massachusetts General Court finally approved the incorporation of Belmont, on March 18, 1859. The complete story of how about a thousand of its leading citizens persuaded the legislature to act on their behalf against the wishes of three much larger and older towns has never been told. By this act of the legislature, Watertown lost 1,446 acres to the northwest, Waltham 429 acres to the east, and West Cambridge 1.8 acres to the south.

History of the Thaddeus Frost House

Edmund Frost, born c. 1600, the first of his family in Massachusetts, was the son of a prominent Puritan minister, and emigrated from Ipswich, England, on the *Good Hope* with his wife Thomazine and a servant, in 1639, the eve of the English Civil War. He bought land in Cambridge the same year, was a successful farmer, and active in his church. The couple had nine children. The seventh, Ephraim, was born in 1642. His son, also named Ephraim, was known to his generation as “Captain” Frost. A grandson, b. 1715, was also named Ephraim. Captain Frost and his son served as selectmen, members of the precinct committee, and as town assessors.

Thaddeus C. Frost (1796-1884) was born in Cambridge, 7 February 1796, the son of Amos Frost and Lydia Bemis. He was the grandson of Captain Ephraim Frost, and a nephew of Captain Stephen Frost, both of whom were Revolutionary War heroes, and served with troops from Menotomy, which became West Cambridge, and then Arlington. Thaddeus Frost grew up in a house at the southeast corner of Pleasant and Brighton Street, which no longer survives. By age eleven Thaddeus was a member of the West Cambridge Musical Society. He married Abigail Monroe Locke, the daughter of Joseph Locke and Abigail Munroe, in West Cambridge, December 8, 1827. According to local tradition he built her the house at 291 Brighton Street. Abigail and “Thaddy” as he was called, had six daughters and two sons.

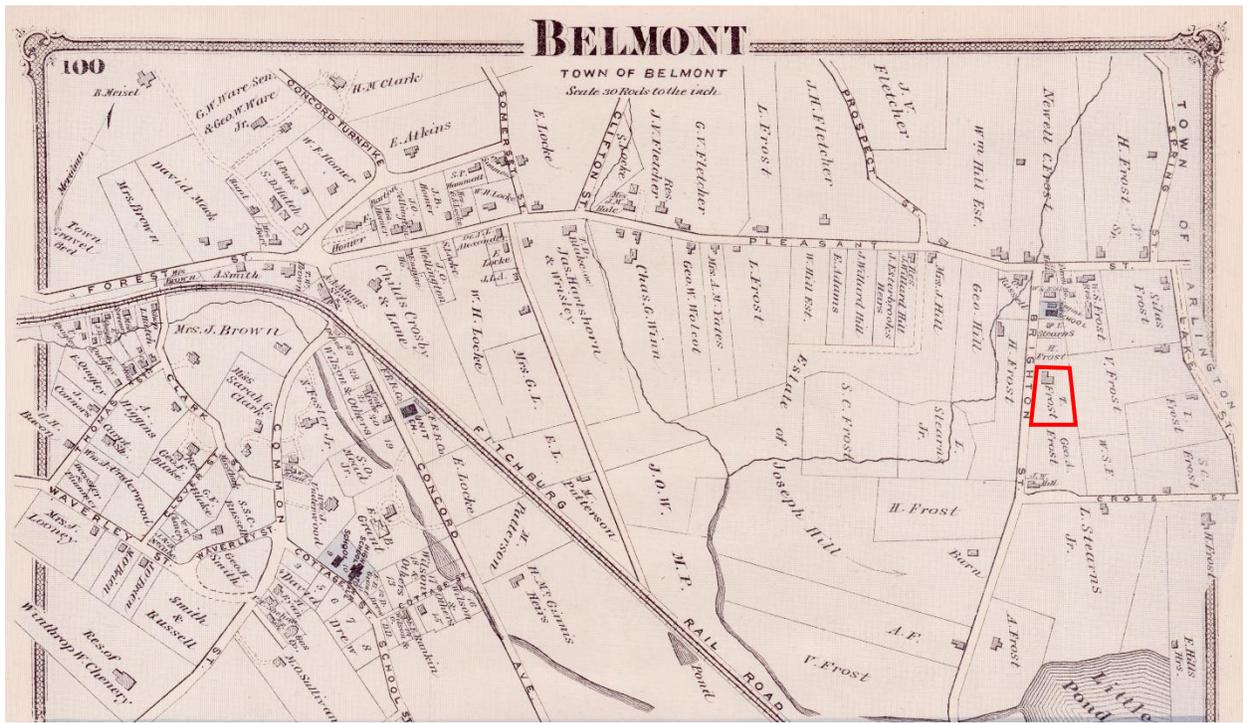
West Cambridge built the Brighton Street public school (1842), probably attended by the Frosts’ younger children, three lots to the west, evidence that their farm was not in Watertown, but the small slice of land taken from West Cambridge when Belmont incorporated in 1859. Thaddeus Frost supplied the school with charcoal, a broom, and other items.

The family was complete by 1850. Thaddeus was 54, Abigail 42, Abby, 18, Ellen, 16, Adeline, 15, Edwin, 13, Margaret, 11, Joseph, 9, George, 6, and Emma 2. The 1860 census shows Thaddeus Frost, 64, as a farmer with \$10,000 in real estate, and personal property of \$350. The 1880 census listed Thaddeus as an 84-year old widower, living with his daughter Margaret, 41, keeping house; son George A. Frost, 36, a farmer; grandson Ernest C. Frost, nine months; nurse Sarah Batchelder, 50, a New Hampshire native; and two young farm hands, one of them a native of Nova Scotia.

Thaddeus Frost died August 3, 1884, and was buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Arlington, Massachusetts. His sixteen acres of mowing, tillage, and pasture land passed to George A. Frost, the only married son. He died in 1890, and a neighboring farmer, Varnum Frost, who owned the land behind Thaddeus, bought the property for \$3,500 at auction. The *1875 J. B. Beers Atlas of Middlesex County* shows a dozen Frosts in this neighborhood below the Arlington line, on either side of both Pleasant and Brighton streets. The name Frost appears on every tract of land between Brighton, Cross, Lake, and Pleasant Streets except for the school, a fire house next to it, a small residence, and a blacksmith and wheelwright’s shop at the corner of Brighton and

Pleasant. So ubiquitous was the Frost clan that historian Betts included a map he called “Land of Frost,” in *The Streets of Belmont*, 298, taken from an 1898 atlas.

The farmhouse at 291 Brighton Street passed out of Frost family hands with its sale in 1899 to Cornelius and Isabella Bresnan. They continued to cultivate the land. In 1910 the couple had five children, a sister-in-law, and three farm workers. “Boston Market Celery” was the farm’s specialty, and older town residents a generation later could still remember the smell of the fresh vegetable in its fields as late as 1944. Mrs. Bresnan died in 1931, and Cornelius Bresnan in 1941 at the age of 83. The Cambridge native had been a market gardener and Belmont resident for half a century according to his obituary in the *Belmont Citizen*.

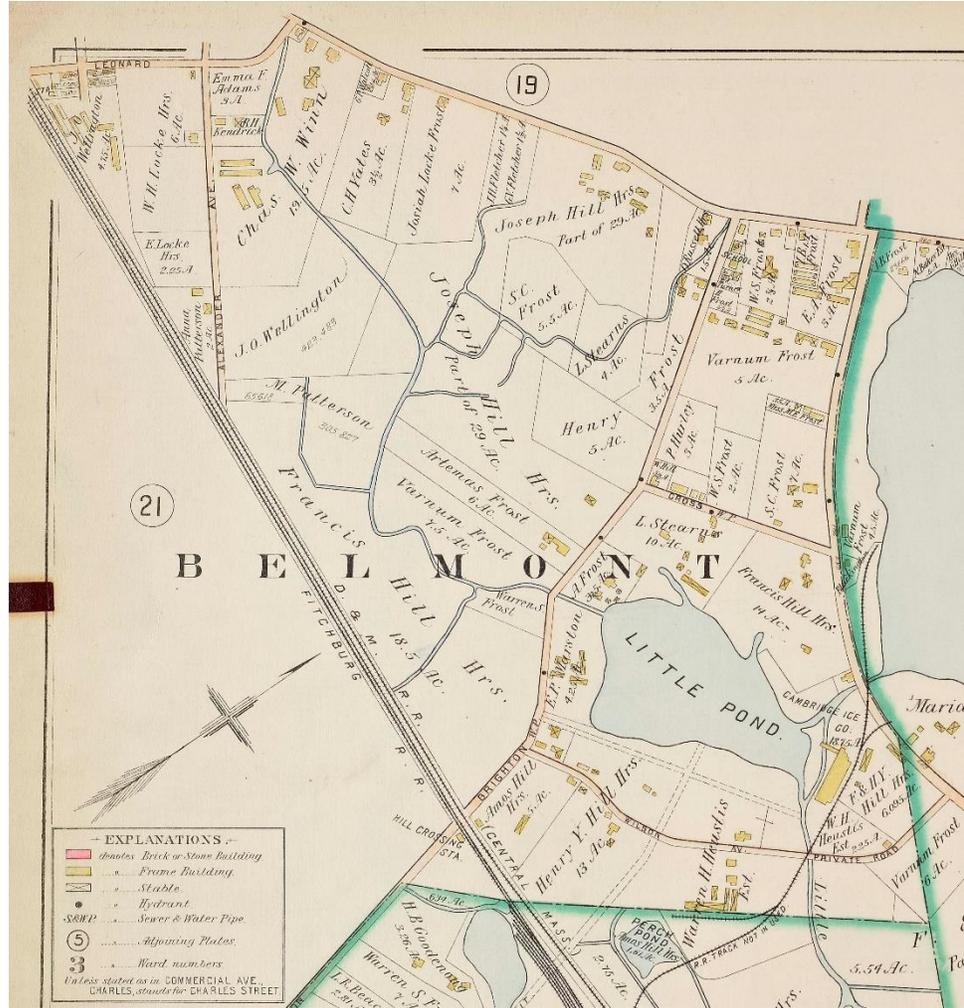


(Above) A portion of Plate 100 from “County Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts” published by F.W. Beers, 1875. This shows the section of Belmont where the Thaddeus Frost house is located, outlined in red. Map courtesy Belmont Historic District Commission files.



(Right) c. 1900 view of the Frost House showing rear ell and shed. *Belmont Citizen*, September 20, 1973, p. 4. Belmont Historical Society.

Detail from Plate 18, *Atlas of Middlesex County, Volume 1*, published by Geo. W. Stadly & Co., 1900. The Frost House is located in upper right as property labeled "Varnum Frost, 5 ac." Massachusetts State Library.



View dated May 20, 1944 showing large farm buildings visible behind the house. Belmont Historical Society



View of house with new garage, c. 1946. Verso reads "Property of Mr. & Mrs. Richard Loring Rablin bought by them from Mr. Chas. Trenholm. Built circa 1802-1808. Became a celebrated celery farm. Developed the 'Boston Market Celery.'" Belmont Historical Society.



Charles E. Trenholm, a prominent local realtor, bought the farm in 1943. He sold the house and farm to Richard Loring Rablin, a statistician, and his wife Jessie H. Rablin in 1944. The couple filed building permits in 1945-46 for a two-car garage that was built by contractor Sam Alcock, who lived at 20 Cutter Street in the Waverley Square neighborhood. The old Frost farm was subdivided in 1946, one of the last market gardens in Belmont to be developed. Arthur Road was cut through on the left side of the lot in 1947. The Rablins owned the house until 1965, when it was bought by the current owner, Athena McInnis.

Architectural Significance

The Thaddeus Frost House is an intact Federal style farmhouse distinguished by its wood frame, pegged pine beams, two and one-half story, five bay, clapboard structure, on a foundation of field stone covered by two feet of brick, a wooden sill on brick, and cut granite rock exterior. It has a modest sidelight Federal entry, and simple corner boards and lintels. One chimney remains on the main block's east side, with another in the rear ell of two stories. A parlor and a sitting room open off the center hall. In the first floor east room there is a corner post. There is an open chimney in the rear of the main part of the house, with a beehive oven, and crane. There is a mid-19th century hardwood ice box in the rear of the ell, where ice was loaded through a chute from the shed behind. The stairways have original balusters and rails. The flooring is largely original. Some of the doorways and doors are original, and some are Greek revival. A low stone wall and a wooden fence enclose the house and the two-car 1946 garage, which occupy a large corner lot of approximately a quarter acre.



View of house after 1965.
Belmont Historical Society

Statement of Significance

The Thaddeus Frost House retains high integrity in most areas, particularly location, design, materials, workmanship, and association. The primary alterations over time besides a 1946 garage set well back on the right rear of the property have been changes in setting and therefore feeling, as Belmont has become a busy Boston suburb and lost almost all of its market garden farms. Rather than being surrounded by small farms, the house is today located in a dense residential/commercial area.

This Frost house was first identified as a historic building of interest in the 1960s when the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) studied Colonial and Federal period resources west of Boston, including many that became part of Minute Man National Historical Park. In 1993, the Massachusetts Historical Commission prepared a written opinion that the house is independently significant under National Register Criteria A and C:

The Thaddeus Frost House is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places meeting National Register Criteria A and C on the local level. The Thaddeus Frost House meets Criterion A of the National Register for its association with the locally prominent Frost family, as well as its associations with the market gardening industry active in the Winn Brook section of Belmont from the third quarter of the 19th century through World War II. The property also meets Criterion C of the National Register as one of the few survivals of Federal-style residential construction in Belmont.

Although the original farm and its related market gardens owned by members of the Frost family covered a much larger land area, the area has been significantly altered by infill housing built in the 1930s and 1940s and none of these Frost farms remain. There are a few remaining early 19th Century Frost houses located on Lake Street. The proposed single property local historic district is illustrated below.

BELMONT’S HISTORIC DISTRICT BYLAW

Belmont has a Historic District Bylaw, Historic District Commission, and established design guidelines that provide technical assistance to property owners in the town’s three existing local historic districts. The Belmont Historical Commission was established in 1968 under MGL Section 8D, Chapter 40, known as the Local Historical Commission Act, which gave Belmont authority to establish historical commissions and boards responsible for advising community government on all matters relating to historic preservation. The Belmont Historic District Commission was established in 1972 to implement the provisions of the Historic District Commission Act, MGL Chapter 40C. Article 15 of the General Laws of Belmont, which established the Historic District Commission (HDC), authorizes the HDC to propose “additional historic districts and changes in historic districts,” (15.4c). The HDC currently reviews projects in the Pleasant Street, Common Street, and the Richardson Farm Local Historic Districts, as well as several preservation restrictions and agreements in Town. The HDC published Design Guidelines for Belmont’s Historic Districts in 2009. The Office of Community Development, under which the HDC operates, maintains a robust website for the Commission, including rules and regulation, application procedures, technical information, the recently completed Historic Resources Survey. With this foundation in place, the Thaddeus Frost House Local Historic District can be seamlessly integrated into the workload of the Historic District Commission and the Office of Community Development. No special considerations or alterations to design guidelines, application, and review procedures are anticipated at this time.

CONCLUSION

This historic ca. 1805 farmhouse and its large lot are in the center of what was once the town’s celery growing area from the late 19th century into the 1940s. It is all that remains of a sixteen acre farm, which represented an important aspect of Belmont’s historical development from more than three decades before the town’s creation, through the market garden era, 1860-1940, and into the post-World War II years of residential subdivisions and the development of Belmont’s current neighborhoods. The house has been documented in MACRIS, given a preliminary evaluation of National Register eligibility by MHC, and its significance confirmed by the Town’s preservation consultant, Lisa Mausolf, who updated the Town-wide historic resources survey. It is one of the few remaining Federal-style residences in Belmont. Belmont has an existing Historic District Commission bylaw, existing Design Guidelines, and can

incorporate this property into a new district following approval by Town Meeting. The owner of the Thaddeus Frost house and the Belmont Historic District Commission believe that the Federal-style structure at 291 Brighton Street deserves the recognition and protection of a Local Historic District.