

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Frederick Ayer Mansion

Other Name/Site Number: Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 395 Commonwealth Avenue

Not for publication:

City/Town: Boston

Vicinity:

State: MA County: Suffolk Code: 025

Zip Code: 02215-2322

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Domestic Sub: Single Dwelling

Current: Domestic Sub: Institutional Housing

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Neo-Classical Revival

MATERIALS:

- Foundation: Stone (Granite)
- Walls: Stone (Granite)
- Roof: Rubber
- Other: Stone (Limestone), Glass, Ceramic Tile

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance**Exterior**

The Ayer Mansion occupies a typical rectangular Boston Back Bay lot set toward the middle of the block between Massachusetts Avenue and Charlesgate East on the north side of Commonwealth Avenue. The attached five-story townhouse sits on a raised basement facing south and is set back approximately twelve feet from the sidewalk. The front of the lot is enclosed by an iron fence and gate that are not original. A paved walk leads from the sidewalk to the entrance steps. Along the east border of the site, steep granite steps lead down to a deep areaway, which fronts the south side of the basement, and the remainder of the lot is planted with a small tree and plantings. A paved parking area approximately twenty-five feet deep separates the rear facade from Marlborough Street. The mansion was joined with the neighboring building in a 1971-72 renovation.

Built in the Neo-Classical Revival style, the south elevation is constructed of large dressed granite blocks with limestone trim at the belt courses and balcony parapet. The four-bay façade features an off-center, two-story bow, which is surmounted by a parapet forming a balcony at the third story. Mosaic panels and banding are set into the granite and limestone at the main entrance surround, in the surround of a single round window at the second story, within the molding of the belt courses, at the third story balcony, at the spandrels between the windows at the fifth story, and at the frieze and underside of the modillions at the cornice. (Four of the seven original mosaic panels at the balcony have been lost.) The mosaics are constructed of glass and stone tesserae set into a cement matrix. They constitute the only known examples of exterior ornament designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany to remain in situ.

The orange, red, and gold tesserae contrast subtly with the building's austere granite cladding. The square and rectangular panels set into the balcony and spandrels feature large geometric compositions; each of which is unique. The mosaic banding of the window surround, balcony rail, cornice, and belt courses features repeated geometric elements. Certain of these patterns recur on the interior of the mansion. Elements of the mosaic medallions and panels set into the main door surround also reappear in the building's interior. A mosaic address plaque is inset in the surround on either side of the main entrance. The simple geometric composition evident in the exterior ornament of 395 Commonwealth Avenue reflects the influence of Byzantine mosaics claimed by Tiffany Studios in an early twentieth century promotional brochure.

The entrance is approached by seven broad granite steps with granite knee walls flanking the top granite landing. Double copper-clad doors at the main entrance have large brass ring handles and two rows of four green glass slag lights set high on each door. The brown-painted, metal panels are secured by round-headed nails. The doors are framed by engaged columns sheathed with opalescent and foil-backed glass mosaic set in a lead framework. These are topped by glass-mosaic capitals of stylized acanthus leaves.

Windows are set in clean, punched openings. The primary windows contain 1/1 wood sash at the upper stories and single hung wood sash with transoms at the first story. The original curved sashes remain at the first and second stories. One of three stained glass transom screens remains at the center window in the first story bow. Its intricate geometric design is dominated by rich orange and green glass with accents of yellow, rose, carmine, and Tiffany's famed white opalescent glass. Also at the first story, an intricate stained glass fanlight dominated by blue and gold glass is set above the main entrance. The three stained glass exterior window screens at the second story have been restored. Set in steel frames, the clear and opalescent amber glass screens are of simple geometric design. The wood prime windows are deeply recessed in the masonry opening, while the stained glass screens are set forward of the prime window, in the plane of the façade. According to conservator Karen

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Rosado from the Lyn Hovey Studio, evidence suggests that these panels were fabricated flat and bent to fit the curvature of the facade upon installation. Stained glass screens covering the second-story round window and the fifth-story prime windows have been lost.

Secondary Elevations

The rear and exposed sections of the side elevation are built of red brick and have no Tiffany-designed features. Four bays in width, the rear (north) elevation is built of a hard-fired face brick and has flat arched window openings framed by granite sills and splayed brick arches at stories 2 – 4. The first story openings have more elaborate brick keystone arches and the fifth story openings have granite lintels. The two oversized openings at the first story are not symmetrical. The east opening contains an aluminum window with three sashes, which are filled with an opaque panel. The west opening has a four-sash window with opaque panels. The remaining windows are aluminum and the openings appear to have been blocked down slightly at the top. The upper stories have one-over-one windows, which have equal size sash at the second and third story, but at the fourth and fifth story the upper sash is shorter than the lower. A narrow opening at the fifth story between bays 1 & 2 has been filled with brick that does not match the original.

The west elevation, built of a common red brick, is exposed at the fifth story and at stories 2 - 5 toward the rear of the building. There is one window opening between the fourth and fifth stories toward the center of the wall. The wall rises above the height of the roof, creating a parapet, and is topped by stone coping. The east elevation is exposed at the fifth story at the front of the building and rises above the roof with a stone coping. The east elevation is parged. Three interior brick chimneystacks are visible rising above the west elevation parapet and one chimney is visible at the east elevation.

Interior

The exterior ornament of the Ayer Mansion scarcely announces the opulence awaiting the visitor indoors. Tiffany's residential designs for wealthy clients often featured a dramatic entrance hall. Accordingly, Tiffany's contributions to the Ayer Mansion are concentrated at the first floor public entry spaces. Although Tiffany-designed windows and fixtures occur sporadically throughout the remainder of the house, most private spaces within the mansion did not incorporate Tiffany-designed features. The two original family living areas that remain on the second and third floors are treated in a Classical Revival style with typical Bostonian restraint. This creates a curious juxtaposition with the more theatrical sensibility Tiffany displayed in the mansion's public and circulation areas.

The Vestibules

The recessed, copper-clad doors and glass mosaic columns at the main entrance create a fanciful transition from Commonwealth Avenue to the mansion's interior. A rectangular, barrel-vaulted Outer Vestibule lies beyond the double doors. Patterned mosaic landings are separated by three slate steps. The walls have a sand finish cast in resin and a reception window was opened in the west wall when the mansion was connected to the neighboring 397-399 Commonwealth Avenue in 1971.

The Outer Vestibule leads to paired oak and glass panel doors with a clear-glass round-arched fanlight. These doors open on a second, cross-vaulted vestibule with identical mosaic floors and cast sand walls. An eight-panel painted wood door with six glazed panels connects the Inner Vestibule to the Marble Hall.

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The Marble Hall

The Marble Hall is a long room, irregular in plan. It occupies approximately half the width of the building. An apsidal arch and stair occupy most of the east wall, and a fireplace is centered on the west wall. Square arches frame entrances to the former Dining Room to the north, and to the Drawing Room and Vestibule to the south. Paint analysis conducted in 1999 indicated that the plaster walls were originally glazed tan-yellow with a layer of shellac applied directly to the plaster.¹

An elliptical opening in the ceiling reveals a four-story stair well that rises from the second floor to an elliptical, clear glass skylight in the roof. The clear glass replaces a stained glass laylight noted in a 1903 inventory. A five-stage brass chandelier is suspended from a crossbeam in the skylight. It supports a branching fixture at each landing and terminates in a “clouded and corrugated glass”² mosaic globe inset with slag glass accents.

The Marble Hall derives its name from its brilliant white marble wainscoting and white marble mosaic floors. The flush marble wainscot rises approximately six feet in height and runs the entire perimeter of the Hall. It terminates at a molding below a mosaic border of blue, green, white opalescent, and foil-backed glass that is set into the plaster walls. The same Islamic star banding is used to accentuate the beams and arches of the Marble Hall. The white marble mosaic floor incorporates randomly placed tan-yellow tesserae, which echo the original wall color.³ The floors are bordered by a geometric mosaic band of blue, green, white and gold glass.

The west wall is dominated by a white marble fireplace set in a slightly projecting chimneybreast. The mantelpiece is inset with mosaic medallions and a mosaic border. Both medallions and border feature gold foil-backed tracery in-filled with opalescent green, blue, and white tesserae. The marble hearth is inset with a similar mosaic band. Bronze grilles are set into the floor on either side of the fireplace. The andirons and fire set differ from their description in the 1903 inventory, suggesting that they are not part of the original Tiffany design. In the west wall to the north of the fireplace, a door has been opened to the neighboring building (ca. 1971).

The north end of the room is dominated by a series of receding square arches that frame the entrance to the former Dining Room. The first arch incorporates a beam. The rounded corners of each arch are accentuated by an outline of mosaic banding set into the face of the plaster wall. Below the second arch, three marble steps with mosaic risers lead to a recessed dining room entrance consisting of wood paneled pocket doors flanked by niches set above the wainscoting. The niches are framed by mosaic bands and are occupied by open-bottomed “Tiffany Favrile glass jars ...over Electric bulbs...Shaded bronze, green and gold coloring.”⁴ The niches are sheathed in gold foil-backed glass mosaic. What appears to be a former telephone closet is set into the east wall beside the Dining Room doors.

The former Dining Room was removed prior to acquisition of the building by the current owners in 1964, and has since been substantially altered to serve as a chapel. Descendants of the Ayer family recently donated the original expandable circular dining table, a matching square side table, and ten matching chairs. A 1903 household inventory does not list the furniture as designed by Tiffany; although its eclectic design is in keeping with Tiffany’s synthetic aesthetic. The existence of an entire set of furniture specific to one of the Mansion’s

¹ Jean Carroon Architects, Inc. “Ayer Mansion Comprehensive Assessment, April 1999” TMs, III-10.

² Description taken from *Inventory of Household Effects of Residence of Frederick Ayer Esq., 395 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, Mass., June 1st 1903*.

³ The wall color of the Marble Hall has been established by tests in the stairwell behind the apsidal arch.

⁴ Description taken from the 1903 inventory.

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prime public spaces further supports Tiffany's hand in either its creation or refinishing. The inventory describes the objects as:

One Dining Room Set of Hardwood; Ivory and Olive Green Enameled; as follows:

1 Dining Table, 6'5" diameter. Seven Post Legs; (nine leaves). slightly scratched, but otherwise perfect.

10 Straight Chairs; 42 1/2" high; seat 20" x 19." Baluster Back; Rounded Top; Seat upholstered in Olive Green Silk Velour. Perfect Condition

.... 1 Hardwood Table, 3' square. Finished with Olive Green Enamel. Cross Leg Brace. Perfect Condition.

The inventory also lists two matching armchairs and four straight chairs to serve the square table. These objects did not accompany the family's recent donation and it is unknown whether they survive. The furniture has been stripped of its original finish. The leaves of the dining room table have been lost, although two original semi-circular extensions survive. The latter fit over the table to expand its circumference to seat ten. The chairs are particularly stylized; with a columnated (baluster) back and swelling crown flanked by carved, tufted finials. Some of the chairs retain the original upholstery, although it is significantly faded. Militating against the attribution of the set to Tiffany is its mediocre craftsmanship and slightly damaged condition as noted in 1903. This suggests the set's creation separate from the Mansion's design, or its creation for the tourist or export trade in one of the Near Eastern countries visited by the Ayer family in the late 1890s.

The east wall of the Marble Hall is dominated by an apse sheltering a semicircular marble stair with mosaic risers. The apse is flanked by two wooden doors. The north door leads to the Back Hall and former Flower Room. The south door leads to the mansion's original elevator. Two additional concealed doors are set in the marble wainscoting within the apse itself. The north door communicates with the former Flower Room and the south with the former Coat Room.

Mosaic banding accentuates the lines of the round apsidal arch when viewed from the Hall. Blue, green, white and gold tesserae are set into the plaster of the intrado and the face of the arch. A ring of electric sockets is hidden behind the arch, suggesting their use as proscenium lighting for amateur theatricals.⁵ The entire half dome beyond the arch is sheathed with gold foil-backed glass mosaic above the marble wainscoting. The tesserae are laid in a radial pattern following the curvature of the dome. The molded cap at the top of the wainscot broadens to form a shelf at the rear of the apse where a smaller, round arch opens on an imperial stair to the second floor Hall. The arch frames a spectacular trompe-l'oeil peristyle mosaic at the rear wall of the double stair.

Like the north wall, the south wall is framed by a square arch whose lines are softened by rounded corners outlined by mosaic banding. The vestibule door described above appears to the west. A single pocket door with large wood panels of similar design leads to the Drawing Room at the east. Both doorways are outlined by round-cornered mosaic banding. A niche is set above the wainscoting between the two doorways. It is identical to those flanking the entrance of the former Dining Room, although the Favre glass jar does not

⁵Personal communication with Marie Oates, Director of the Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center, November 2002. Ayer family lore maintains that Frederick Ayer's second wife, Ellen Barrows Banning, enjoyed staging such performances.

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survive.

The Drawing Room

The Drawing Room lies to the south of the Marble Hall. It is square in plan on three sides with a bow-front facing Commonwealth Avenue. Three curved windows with transoms occupy the bow. The Louis XVI decor meets a molded plaster ceiling of eclectic style. An acoustic tile ceiling has been removed to reveal the original floral-patterned ceiling, cornice, and frieze (restored in 2000). A three-foot-high paneled wood wainscot is surmounted by a paneled wall. The fields of the wall panels are painted a rich mustard color. Narrow pilasters set between the larger panels are painted pale peach. Contemporary sconces have been set in the pilasters where more elaborate original Tiffany fixtures noted in the 1903 inventory are visible in a circa 1908 photograph of the room. A projecting chimneybreast has a simple wood fireplace surround, which was installed in the eastern wall of the room as part of a 2000 rehabilitation. The original mantelpiece and hearth at this location has been lost. The floor is oak parquet in a geometric pattern with a border of the same pattern.

The Tiffany-designed stained glass transom screen in the center window is of an intricate, Byzantine-influenced geometric design expressed in an autumnal palette of rich orange and green glass with accents of yellow, rose, carmine, and Tiffany's famed white opalescent glass. The manner in which the stained glass transom echoes the recently restored original wall color accentuates the subtle harmony of Tiffany's decorative scheme.

Stair to the Hall

The apse of the Marble Hall opens on to a white marble imperial stair illuminated by a Tiffany laylight. The stair is lined with marble that continues the wainscot of the Marble Hall. Above the wainscot, the walls are of tan-yellow glazed plaster. The laylight is 4 feet by 20 feet and was restored (2002) using existing glass. Missing pieces were replaced with rare surviving glass from the stocks of Tiffany Studios now in the collection of the Neustadt Museum of Tiffany Art. The eight-panel laylight incorporates a wide variety of glasses in a lead matrix and employs the same color scheme found in the Marble Hall mosaics as well as the clouded and corrugated glass of the pendant globe. The design consists of “[a] series of alternating squares-within-circles and diamonds-within-squares . . . cut from a milky semi-opalescent glass with ‘mottles and freckling’ set in a field of clear ripple glass. Glittering gold ripple glass is used in the borders and crisscross lattice pattern, while an inner border of 2-inch-round opal cast glass jewels frames the Moorish-style geometric composition. The outer border and parts of the inner design are highlighted with diamonds and half-circles of blue and green opalescent glass.”⁶ Electric lights originally set in the wood sill above the laylight permitted the modulation of nighttime illumination to create a range of moods. The fixtures have been restored (2002) to their original positions so that the same range of lighting effects is once again possible.

A magnificent trompe l'oeil glass mosaic is centered on the east wall of the stair. This architectural illusion presents a tour de force of Tiffany's mosaic technique. Mirror-backed voids set between columns, and subtle gradations of color create the illusion of a receding peristyle surmounted by a hemispherical half dome. Set flush with the wall, the mosaic exploits the slight projection of the white marble wainscot to create a receding perspective. This is particularly noticeable in the manner in which the wainscot has been cut away around the first mosaic column and in the continuation of the wainscot molding as the architrave of the mosaic peristyle. Engaged columns of opalescent glass affixed to the surface of the wainscoting continue the effect. The edges of the glass tiles are painted to suggest a rounded volume. Their luminescence contrasts with the darker mosaic columns of the peristyle to heighten the illusion of shadowy depth. Opalescent white, blue, and aquamarine

⁶ Memo from Brian Roche, Lynn Hovey Studio, Inc. 4/16/03.

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glass predominates with gold foil-backed glass tile used above the wainscoting and within the hemispherical dome.

The Hall

The staircase from the first floor splits into two flights of stairs at a broad landing at the east wall. The two marble flights of stairs rise at right angles from the landing to quarter-turn stairs, each with a landing. The two flights emerge at the north and south walls of the second floor Hall. The top stair is gently curved and the banister terminates in an open columnated newel with knob. Designed as a portrait gallery, the Hall features a central seating and viewing area surrounded by a delicate, fluted wooden balustrade. Two square wood columns rise to the ceiling at the east corners of the viewing area. The plaster walls are painted dull orange and the wooden floors are covered with vinyl composition tile. Paintings were hung high on the wall above the stair. The 1903 household inventory lists the family portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes originally displayed by the Ayers in this space.

Doors appear in the north and south walls of the second floor Hall. An elliptical staircase rises along the west wall from the second to the third floor. The half-turn staircase with winders is wooden and the steps are covered with a vinyl composition tile. The same fluted balustrade continues up the staircase with a transition to a simplified design at the third floor. A branching eight-light fixture is suspended in the stairwell that rises four floors to the skylight. Except for the original globe at the base, none of the original Tiffany shades remain.

Mrs. Ayer's Chamber

A corridor at the north of the Hall leads to Mrs. Ayer's Chamber at the northeast corner of the Mansion. This room and the former Breakfast Room on the third floor, are the only surviving private spaces of the original Mansion. The Chamber is the sole original room to remain in the rear portion of the Mansion. It did not originally possess any Tiffany-designed features. The room is square in plan with plaster walls and a cornice molding at the ceiling. The three-panel door to the corridor and another door of identical design are set symmetrically in the south wall. Centered on the east wall, a wood mantelpiece with fluted pilasters frames a surround and hearth each faced with small glazed bricks. Two double hung windows with simple molded surrounds look out on Marlborough Street to the north. A crystal chandelier is suspended from the ceiling in the center of the room. The fixture is not listed in the 1903 inventory and may not be original to Tiffany and Manning's design.

The Library

A doorway leads south from the Hall into a narrow rectangular antechamber running east-west. The elevator door is set into the east wall. The original, dark wood Library door and door surround lie directly ahead in the south wall. The surround is formed of carved engaged wood columns supporting an entablature. While the surround has been slightly altered with a built-out frame, the original carpentry appears to be intact beneath. The doors were originally single pocket doors that met at a central mullion. The east door led to the Library and the west to an adjoining closet noted in the 1903 inventory. The east door has since been placed on hinges and the other is currently fixed. The four-panel doors feature a raised cross motif with central panel and the original lock plates survive.

The Library is a square room with bow-front and is identical in plan to the Drawing Room below. The ceiling is plaster. Although the original crushed velour wall panels have disappeared, the original dark-stained wood trim remains. An elaborate 11-inch deep, carved wooden frieze embellishes the entire perimeter of the room. Each panel is a unique composition featuring the bookplates of famous men. An elaborate carved wood

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chimney piece and overmantel are centered on the east wall and project deeply into the room. The features are framed by two fluted columns with egg and dart capitals set on tall pedestals to support a lower architrave. The architrave is embellished with a carved frieze of repeating stylized cruciform paterae. The fireplace reportedly remains in place behind an altar installed in 1977 when the Library was converted to a chapel. The floor was carpeted in 1977.

Built-in base cabinets line the north and east walls. The glass front panels were replaced with fabric in the 1977 renovation. The original hardware survives. A similar cabinet was moved to the Closet, which now serves as a sacristy. Stained oak molding was installed on the west wall of the Library to replicate the pattern of the missing cabinetry. A Tuscan surround consisting of pilasters set on tall pedestals and supporting an entablature frames the oak door to the Hall in the north wall.

The original double hung curved sash windows with curved glass remain intact. The windows are set in dark-stained paneled recesses. Hinged shutters were installed during the 1977 renovation. The original stained glass exterior screens are described in the exterior description.

Two doors in the west wall of the library lead to the sacristy; the south door having been fixed closed. The sacristy (former closet) is a narrow, rectangular room. It terminates to the south at a round, clear glass window with wood surround that is set above the main entrance on the exterior. The original stained glass window has been lost.

The Stairs

The Mansion's elliptical stairwell rises from the second floor Hall to the fifth floor, where it terminates at an elliptical skylight. The curious geometry, impressive five-story chandelier, and crowning stained glass skylight (now lost) insist on the stairwell's inclusion as an integral part of Tiffany's design. (The 1903 inventory lists an exotic fifth floor "Sky Parlor," which was filled with bric-a-brac from the Ayer's travels in Europe and the Middle East. A large skylight that has been capped at the roof, located toward the south end of the roof suggests that this notable feature of the Ayer Mansion-- almost certainly of Tiffany's design -- has been lost.) A wooden balustrade runs the entire height of the staircase. The balusters are fluted from the second to the third floor and are not fluted above the third floor. At each floor, a Tiffany-designed fixture branches out from the main shaft of the light fixture suspended in the stairwell.

The staircase landings above the second floor of the Mansion are treated in a more traditional, Revivalist style than the first floor public areas. Trim is decidedly Classical in these private areas of the house; except at the fifth floor where round-cornered arches echo the fluid lines of the Marble Hall. Arched doorways lead south and north from each landing with a door centered on the east wall that led to former linen and storage closets. The molded Palladian arches are each set on engaged columns and crowned by a keystone. At the third floor a denticulated ceiling molding survives and a paneled wainscot runs along the north and south halls. An identical wainscot embellishes the wall of the stair between the third and fourth floors. The fourth floor appears to have originally been finished with a simple cornice molding lacking denticulation. The elliptical opening of the stair is treated with a paneled soffit at each landing above the second floor.

The identically smooth arches of the fifth floor landing and Marble Hall, as well as the lost Tiffany skylight that crowned the chandelier, suggest that the fifth story was considered part of the Mansion's public space. The Mansion was originally equipped with an elevator, which permitted guests to bypass the Ayer family's private chambers while accessing the fifth floor. One can imagine the effect of riding a passenger elevator to the very height of the house where the glass-ceilinged Sky Parlor offered an exotic setting for entertainment beneath the

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stars. Tiffany's exploitation of the building's height and vertical circulation within the design of this lost room speaks of his designs for Manhattan penthouses, including his own residence.

The Breakfast Room

The third floor Breakfast Room is one of the Mansion's two private spaces not to have been entirely lost. Like Mrs. Ayer's Chamber at the second floor, the Breakfast Room did not originally possess any Tiffany-designed features. Located at the southeast corner of the building, the Breakfast Room is identical in plan to the Library and Drawing Room below. Subsequent renovation divided the room such that only two of the three original windows are visible on the south wall. These are recessed with simple molded wood frames. The west window (originally the center window) uniquely extends from ceiling to floor in order to access the balcony atop the Mansion's two-story bow. The east bay has a wood panel below the window. The original wood floor of the Breakfast Room is exposed. The fireplace centered on the east wall has been altered and now has a simple molded surround.

Floor plan

The floor plan of the third through fifth floors consists of three bedrooms at the front and rear of the building. These are accessed by a T-shaped corridor at the front and an L-shaped corridor at the rear running from the central stair landing. The original linen and storage closets located between the stairhall and lightwell have been converted to lounges.

Landscape

The iron fence at the front yard is appropriate, but not original to the site, and the current owners installed the plantings. The rear of the lot is paved for parking.

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Completed in 1901, the Frederick Ayer Mansion possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. As the only known surviving example of exterior ornamentation designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, and one of his most intact and complete residential interior designs, the Ayer Mansion has attracted the attention of numerous historians. Tiffany expert Alice Frelinghuysen considers it one of his most lavish existing creations and architectural historians Bainbridge Bunting and Douglass Shand-Tucci each have noted its importance in the context of local architectural development. Built by Frederick Ayer, a prominent businessman of the late nineteenth century with interests in a wide variety of industries, the Ayer Mansion is also associated with developments in regional economic history.

Louis Comfort Tiffany: A Pioneer of Interior Design

The Frederick Ayer Mansion at 395 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, (1899 -1901) is a rare example of Louis Comfort Tiffany's exterior and interior residential design that survives in situ. A master of surface ornament and color, Tiffany was a pioneer of the interior design profession. His work with the Associated Artists (1879-1883) established a new respect for American decorative arts on the international stage and provided the basis for a long successful career. Tiffany was the "most fashionable purveyor of taste" during America's Gilded Age,⁷ having renovated the White House under President Arthur (1882), as well as having created apartments and homes for America's most influential families. His design studios catered to a post-Civil War clientele that was eager to announce its wealth and social standing through prominent, forward-looking commissions.

According to historian Neil Harris, Tiffany also exploited the nascent mass media and new photographic technologies to become one of the first "celebrity designers" of the industrial age.⁸ Tiffany is known to have collaborated with such notable architects as Stanford White, Bernard Maybeck, Peabody and Stearns, George B. Post, and Edward T. and William A. Potter. He also collaborated on window designs with painters Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Paul Serusier. Such exposure ensured that Tiffany's influence extended to every type of public and private institution including houses of worship, theaters, social clubs, universities, memorials, and mausolea.

Tiffany's innovations in glass making and interior design garnered almost immediate international recognition. Exhibits of his glass and mosaics won frequent awards at International Expositions from the 1890s through the 1910s. Following a triumphant 1892 exhibition in Paris organized to solidify Tiffany's continental market appeal, the dealer Siegfried Bing became the designer's sole European distributor. According to Alice Frelinghuysen, curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, European representation ensured that "his work was widely known and critiqued with acclaim throughout America and around the world."⁹

⁷ Frelinghuysen, Alice. "Louis Comfort Tiffany at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (Summer 1998).

⁸ Duncan, Alastair, Martin Eidelberg and Neil Harris. *Masterworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany*. New York: Abrams, 1989, 18.

⁹ Frelinghuysen, "Louis Comfort Tiffany at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," 4.

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The Ayer Mansion: A Rare Survival

The Ayer Mansion is one of only three known domestic Tiffany interiors to remain in situ, the others being the Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) House in Hartford, Connecticut (1881) (NHL, 1962) and the Pierre Ferry House in Seattle, Washington (1903-1906). Tiffany's contributions to the Ferry and Twain Houses focus on the insertion of such secondary decorative accents as stained glass, fixtures, wall treatments, and custom furniture within another architect's independent design. By contrast, the sophisticated integration of ornament and architecture at the Ayer Mansion points to Tiffany's extended involvement in its overall design. Tiffany expert Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen claims the Ayer Mansion is the designer's "most lavish and unusual use of mosaic decoration in the domestic context."¹⁰

The Ayer Mansion is also unusual for its exterior Tiffany mosaics. While Tiffany is known to have fashioned dozens of interiors during his fifty-year career, exterior ornamentation was rarely included as part of his design program. Tiffany's own house was an exception. The entrance loggia of Laurelton Hall, the summer home designed by the artist in 1902, incorporated exterior mosaics and mosaic columns; albeit on a far grander scale than those at the Ayer Mansion. Laurelton Hall burned to the ground in 1957 and only individual components survive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The Ayer Mansion is quite probably the only extant in situ example of exterior ornamentation by Tiffany.

The Ayer Mansion exemplifies several of Tiffany's contributions to American design history. The entrance hall and exterior façade join a variety of media and design motifs to create a unified work of art, an effect for which Tiffany was heralded from his initial partnerships with the Associated Artists.¹¹ Tiffany created the Ayer Mansion stained glass and mosaics using techniques and materials that were pioneered by his studio. For example, the Marble Hall includes the designer's signature opalescent glass, his semi-transparent glass backed by metallic foil, and "plated" surfaces.

In addition to daring exploration of new media, Tiffany played an important role in shifting the inspiration of American interior design from Europe to the Orient. Influenced by his own extended travels as a young painter, Tiffany's design reflects his interest in the arts of Persia, India, Byzantium, Japan and North Africa. He was noted by his contemporaries for combining disparate aesthetic sources in lavish compositions governed by balance and taste. Tiffany remained faithful to this approach by exploiting the austere form and mute white surfaces of the Marble Hall as foils to the rich Near Eastern color and pattern of its decorative scheme. Byzantine-influenced mosaic medallions and banding similarly offset the starkly Neo-Classical street elevation.

Both the interior and exterior of the Ayer Mansion were unusually progressive for turn-of-the-century Boston and would have distinguished the Ayers as worldly patrons. The bold street elevation faced in light-colored granite and ornamented with brightly hued mosaics introduced a modernizing aesthetic to Boston's Back Bay. Bainbridge Bunting, the definitive historian of Back Bay domestic architecture, maintains that "after 1895 only one large...house, 395 Commonwealth Avenue, was built in a non-historic style."¹² Douglass Shand-Tucci concurs that the building was the first in the area to display "progressive" tendencies.¹³ Colorful mosaic ornament serves to counterbalance the mansion's stark form and the voids created by windows lacking surrounds. Tiffany expert Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen comments: "It was a completely novel idea to

¹⁰ Frelinghuysen, Alice Cooney "Louis Comfort Tiffany and the Dawning of a New Era for Mosaics." *The Tiffany Chapel at the Morse Museum*. Winter Park, FL: Morse Foundation, 2002, 56.

¹¹ Frelinghuysen, "Louis Comfort Tiffany at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," 4.

¹² Bainbridge Bunting. *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*. Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1967.

¹³ Douglass Shand-Tucci. *Built in Boston, City and Suburb, 1800 - 1950*. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978, 191.

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announce the thematic ornament of the interior design on the exterior facade.”¹⁴ More than any other Boston building of its time, the Ayer Mansion can be placed beside contemporaneous European architecture. It particularly recalls the contrast of ornament and austere form found in the early Art Nouveau buildings of Joseph Olbrich in Austria and Germany, and Charles H. Townsend in England.

Tiffany combined mosaics and stained glass to transform the Marble Hall into what Frelinghuysen has described as “a visual feast of color, light and texture.”¹⁵ A sumptuous entrance hall is characteristic of Tiffany’s more significant commissions. The foyers of the Clemens house, the Havemeyer residence in New York City (1892, now demolished), Tiffany’s own penthouse at the Bella Apartments (1878, now demolished), and the lobby of the Osborne Apartment Building in New York City (1885), each showcased a rich variety of materials and design motifs. Such grand entrances marked the patron’s social prestige and were often published in early architectural interior magazines as examples of the “American Renaissance” in design.

Tiffany stained glass and mosaics were perhaps most sought after for houses of worship. Jacob Adolphus Holzer, head of Tiffany’s mosaic department until 1898, was responsible for installation of the firm’s 1893 mosaics at the Central Congregational Church in Boston (67 Newbury Street, in the Back Bay Historic District NRDIS 8/14/73). Tiffany later published a pamphlet on the decor of Central Congregational. The existence of a Tiffany ecclesiastical interior in the Back Bay testifies to the designer’s notoriety among the Boston elite. The proximity of Central Congregational to 395 Commonwealth Avenue also suggests that the Ayer family may have had more than a passing familiarity with the designer’s work.

With its high marble wainscoting, mosaic stair risers and columns, and the trompe l’oeil mosaic that continues the apsidal effect of the recessed stairs, the Marble Hall strongly recalls Tiffany’s “Romanesque” chapel displayed at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. Originally intended as an advertisement for his work in mosaic and glass, Tiffany “came to regard [the chapel] as his artistic chef d’oeuvre.”¹⁶ Visited by 1.4 million visitors (including Frederick Ayer¹⁷) and awarded 54 medals, the chapel was the “pinnacle of his work” in mosaic. Later installed in the crypt of St. John the Divine in New York City, the chapel was moved to Laurelton Hall after Ralph Adams Cram’s 1911 renovations purposefully walled it off to assert the Gothic integrity of the cathedral. The chapel was destroyed in the 1957 fire that leveled Laurelton Hall, although an original lantern from the 1893 exposition still hangs in the aforementioned Central Congregational Church. Other surviving elements are held by the Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, Florida. Only at the Ayer Mansion may a comparable interior be experienced in its entirety.

Tiffany’s experiments in glass technologies beginning in the 1870s resulted in entirely new products that revolutionized the industry. According to historian Robert Koch, Tiffany’s opalescent glass, patented by 1881 and utilized in the Ayer Mansion, “proved to be among the most important advances in decorative windows since the Middle Ages.”¹⁸ The peristyle mosaic on the wall of the imperial stair between the Marble Hall and second floor Hall constitutes a tour-de-force of Tiffany’s innovations. Composed of semitransparent glass backed by reflective metallic foil, the perspectival effect also relies on Tiffany’s characteristic technique of “plating,” or layering clear and opaque glasses to deepen color and suggest three-dimensional reality. The slight projection of the adjoining engaged columns, as well as painted shadowing across the glass tiles, furthers the optical illusion. The peristyle mosaic particularly links the Ayer Mansion design scheme to the 1893

¹⁴ Frelinghuysen, “Louis Comfort Tiffany and the Dawning of a New Era for Mosaics,” 57.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Ann Clifford, 2001.

¹⁶ Rollins Maxwell. “The Interiors of Louis Comfort Tiffany,” *Social Register* (Summer 1999): 45.

¹⁷ Frederick Ayer. *The Reminiscences of Frederick Ayer*. Boston: Privately Printed, 1923, p. 40 fn.

¹⁸ Frelinghuysen, “Louis Comfort Tiffany at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” 29.

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Chicago exposition chapel. The scenographic quality of the Marble Hall and stair may also be related to its possible use as a setting for amateur theatricals and musicals.

The Favrile glass jars that flank the entrance to the Ayer's former Dining Room represent yet another significant aspect of Tiffany's career. They are examples of the designer's response to growing demand for decorative accents that would render any environment "memorable," no matter how modest or extraordinary the setting. Harris has termed such objects "personalized industrial production."¹⁹ Tiffany increasingly incorporated "unique" objets d'art in his interior design, often producing a limited edition for use in several commissions at once. Harris claims that this "aggressively marketed workshop output" constitutes another of Tiffany's contributions to American design history.

Unlike the workshop of William Morris, Tiffany Studios recognized the inevitability of industrial production as well as its potential to make objects of beauty widely accessible. Harris' assertion of "aggressive marketing" is borne out by a promotional "Portfolio" in the collection of the Boston Public Library. The pamphlet showcases Tiffany products available for sale that range from commonly accessible table glass and reading lamps to the costly commission of a memorial window or decorative mosaic. Tiffany was a shrewd businessman, claiming from the beginning that he was "going after the money there is in art, but art is there all the same."²⁰ Any history of American design must emphasize Tiffany's contribution to the formation of his profession through the creation of product lines and marketing strategies that ensured him fifty years of brisk business. Thus, the Favrile glass jars at the Ayer Mansion are testament to Tiffany's entrepreneurial ingenuity as well as to the quality of his art.

Beyond Tiffany's work in the Marble Hall, the Ayer Mansion contains numerous examples of the designer's work in stained glass. A fanlight over the main entrance, three exterior bow-front exterior window screens at the second story, an ornate transom screen in the Drawing Room, and an impressive laylight crowning the imperial stair to the second floor; all continue the rich pattern and color that characterize the foyer. In design, these windows hearken back to Tiffany's early stained glass of the 1870s, employing simple geometric motifs reminiscent of Byzantine influence. The historical and architectural significance of the laylight (which measures 4 feet by 20 feet) is underscored by the Neustadt Museum of Tiffany Art's decision to permit rare pieces of original Tiffany glass to be used in its restoration. An ornate glass globe also survives as the terminus of the Tiffany lighting fixture that stretches five stories from the mansion roof to the Marble Hall.

Byzantine design sources as well as the influence of Tiffany's 1893 Exposition Chapel are also identifiable in the Ayer Mansion's exterior mosaics. The circular and diamond medallions adorning the front door surround recall the mosaics set into the ciborium arches of the Exposition Chapel. A repeating Islamic star motif in the Marble Hall border mosaics (which also appears in photographs of the Chapel), offers further evidence of the 1893 Chapel as a strong source for the Ayer Mansion's decorative scheme. In addition to colored stone tesserae, Tiffany employed the same range of glass types in the exterior mosaics as in those of the Marble Hall, underscoring the unity of the Ayer Mansion's exterior and interior decorative schemes.

Two contemporary sources definitively associate Louis Comfort Tiffany with the design of the Ayer Mansion. *The American Architect and Building News* illustrated the newly-completed house on December 21, 1901, and described Tiffany's involvement: "In carrying out his design, the architect had the benefit of association with Mr. Louis Comfort Tiffany, who designed the exterior mosaic-work, which makes the house so notable on a Boston street, as well as decorated the interesting main staircase ..." Secondly, a sketch titled "Smoking Room

¹⁹ Duncan, Eidelberg, and Harris, 36-37.

²⁰ Wilson H. Faude, "Associated Artists and the American Renaissance in the Decorative Arts," *Winterthur Portfolio* 10: 102.

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at the Ayer Mansion, Boston” and owned by Ayer descendants, is attributed to Rene de Quelin, Tiffany’s head interior designer. The Turkish Smoking Room is reminiscent of Tiffany’s own studio, now destroyed. It is not known whether the Smoking Room design was ever executed. However, a 1903 inventory as well as a built-over skylight in the mansion roof point to an exotically furnished, glass-roofed “Sky Parlor” that was constructed on the top floor.

The Architect

Alfred J. Manning, a New York-based architect, is identified on the building permit as the architect for the Ayer Mansion. He is also mentioned in the 1901 article in *The American Architect and Building News*. Manning worked with architect Robert H. Robertson beginning in 1884 and became his partner, head draftsman and office manager in 1887. Robertson and Manning collaborated on several significant commissions in and around New York City: the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad station at Mott Haven, New York, executed in a Richardsonian Romanesque style (1885 - 87), the renovation of the New York Club at 370 Fifth Avenue in the Queen Anne style (1893), and a row of housing in Brooklyn’s Clinton Hill district (1891)²¹ that marks the pair’s transition to a “more strict and constraining Renaissance-based Classicism.”²² In about 1900, when the Ayer Mansion was designed, Manning left Robertson’s office to practice independently in New York until 1914.

Manning’s association with Tiffany may have begun in the office of his mentor. During the 1870s, Robertson had worked with architects George B. Post, Edward T. Potter, and William A. Potter, all of whom frequently collaborated with Tiffany. Significantly, Post designed the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building that housed Tiffany’s chapel at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition. Manning was also a resident of Irvington-on-Hudson, New York where the Tiffany family maintained a summer home and the architect’s offices were located at 121 East 23rd Street around the corner from Tiffany’s own.²³

Manning and Tiffany later collaborated on a reading room for the Public Library located in the Irvington Town Hall, Irvington, New York (1901-2; NR 1984). Tiffany’s involvement was stipulated by the donor of the library furnishings, Miss Helen Gould.²⁴ Tiffany-designed elements include wrought-iron lanterns with Favre glass shades, mosaic tile work in blue, green, and gold (a palette reminiscent of the Ayer Mansion Marble Hall), and a clock.²⁵ In 1905 Manning designed “Rochroane,” a forty-four-room castle in Irvington, New York, for oil and cotton magnate Melchior S. Belthoover.²⁶ Rochroane incorporated a Tiffany landscape window now in the Corning Museum of Glass.²⁷

Manning’s other independent commissions include the Washington Irving High School in Tarrytown, New York (1897; NR 1984).²⁸ His design for the summer home of E. J. Nathan at Elberon, New Jersey, was celebrated in the October 1905 *Homes and Garden* as an example of the “very excellent result (possible to achieve) by the co-operation of a little common sense on the part of the owner and a little good taste on the part of a well-trained architect...”

²¹ See National Register Nomination Form for “Clinton Hill North.”

²² Stern, Robert A. M. *New York 1880*. Princeton: Monacelli, 891.

²³ Alice Frelinghuysen. “Louis C. Tiffany and the Dawning of a New Era for Mosaics,” 58, Note.

²⁴ Austin N. O’Brien, *National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form: Irvington Town Hall, Irvington, NY*. 1984.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Frelinghuysen, “Louis C. Tiffany and the Dawning of a New Era for Mosaics,” 58, Note.

²⁸ O’Brien, “Irvington Town Hall.”

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The Artists

At the time the Ayer Mansion was constructed, the Tiffany Studio mosaic department was under the direction of Clara Wolcott Driscoll (1881 - 1945). Driscoll had worked her way up from a designer in the firm and traveled to Europe with Tiffany for research purposes in the summer of 1907.²⁹ In 1898, the year of Driscoll's promotion to department head, about twenty women were employed in Tiffany's mosaic shop.³⁰ Tiffany preferred female workers because he believed them to possess greater manual dexterity and patience. Frelinghuysen notes that while few mosaic workers have been identified, two women were reported to have worked on a mosaic panel for a church in Boston in the year the Ayer Mansion was designed.

Tiffany's association with female craftspeople dates to his association with Candace T. Wheeler. In the 1870s Wheeler had enlisted Tiffany in founding a workshop to train under-privileged women in handicrafts. It was Tiffany's frustration with the workshop's lack of profitability that led to creation of Associated Artists as an explicitly commercial venture. Textiles fabricated by the workshop were used in Associated Artists designs and even after dissolving the firm, Tiffany employed workshop graduates in his own studios.

The Clients

Frederick and Ellen Barrows Banning Ayer were undoubtedly involved in the decision to hire Louis Comfort Tiffany. Frederick Ayer (1822-1918) had amassed a fortune over a long and varied career as a businessman and investor. From his initial success in his brother's patent medicine concern, Ayer expanded his interests to dry goods, textiles, railroads, canals, mining and real estate. The Ayers were prominent mid-century citizens of Lowell, Massachusetts, where Frederick built an impressive Second Empire mansion on Pawtucket Street.

The Ayer Brothers' patent medicine business grew into an international empire, with Frederick traveling extensively through Central America to expand their market. A surviving 1883 manual of Ayer Company remedies translated into French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Spanish, Italian, Bohemian, Welsh and Hawaiian, testifies to their foresight in marketing to European immigrant communities within the United States as well as exploiting expanding national influence abroad. Painted signs for the J. C. Ayer Company are still visible on the J. C. Ayer Company Building at 176 – 190 Middle Street in Lowell.

Soon after Frederick Ayer married his second wife, Ellen Barrows Banning, the couple and four children took an extended trip to Europe, North Africa and the Near East. A 1903 inventory suggests that the Ayers collected exotic furnishing and decorative arts during this trip between 1896 and 1898. It seems safe to conjecture that Tiffany's Orientalist design may have appealed to the Ayers as a fitting backdrop for the numerous souvenirs they brought back to Boston. Frederick Ayer would have also been familiar with Tiffany's work from his visit to the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

In April 1899 Frederick Ayer purchased three lots on Commonwealth Avenue. By December of that year he had selected Manning as his architect and filed a building permit for 395 Commonwealth Avenue. According to his reminiscences, Mr. Ayer personally "devoted much time to the planning of all details [of the mansion]. As a result the construction and equipment of the house was practically perfect, though the architectural results

²⁹ Frelinghuysen, "Louis C. Tiffany and the Dawning of a New Era for Mosaics," 67.

³⁰ Ibid.

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were a disappointment to him”³¹ One senses that his wife Ellen Ayer, who was described as “theatrical and fond of travel” and was still a young woman in her early 40s, was also quite influential in decisions relative to the mansion. She may well have advocated for the trip abroad, for relocating to Boston, and for the exotic, theatrical entrance hall at 395 Commonwealth Avenue.

The Ayer mansion has served numerous uses since the death of Frederick Ayer in 1918. Except for the central stairhall, the floorplans above the second floor were substantially altered by subsequent owners. None of these rooms -- excluding the fifth floor Sky Parlor -- were included in Tiffany’s designs. In the 1940s, 16 spaces within the building were leased as medical offices when the Back Bay was the preferred address for Boston physicians. The occupancy remained as medical offices until the Ayer Mansion and adjacent building at 397/399 Commonwealth Avenue were bought by an insurance company in 1953 for use as an office building. The Hearthstone Insurance Company sold the buildings in 1964 to the present owner, the Trimount Foundation and Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center. The mansion was joined with the neighboring building in a 1971-72 renovation and currently functions as a residence for women students.

³¹ Ayer, 78.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Less than one acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	19	327800	4690470

Verbal Boundary Description:

From the deed of transfer January 9, 1953 to Hearthstone Insurance Company, Book 6839, p.569.

“A certain parcel of land with the buildings thereon situated and now numbered 395 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, in the County of Suffolk, being all of Lot 8 and a portion of Lot 7 on a plan by Fuller and Whitney, dated January 11, 1886, recorded with Suffolk Deeds, Book 1709, Page 525, bounded and described as follows: Southerly on said Commonwealth Avenue, Thirty-one and 97/100 (31.97) feet; Westerly on land now or formerly of Cotting, more recently of Ross, by a line running through the middle of a brick party wall, One hundred Fifty-Two and 3/100 (152.03) feet; Northerly on Marlboro Street, Thirty-two and 9/100 (32.09) feet; Easterly on land now or formerly of Dexter shown as Lot 9 on said plan, One Hundred Fifty-four and 37/100 (154.37) feet. Containing 4899.9 square feet or however otherwise bounded or described, be all of said measurements or contents more or less.”

Boundary Justification:

The legal boundary describes the area of land presently occupied by the Frederick Ayer Mansion and represents the original boundaries of the lot historically occupied by the mansion.

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