

**Historic New England reimagines Otis House campus as community cultural anchor  
amid neighborhood redevelopment**

***Library and Archives makes interim move to nearby 85 Merrimac Street***

**BOSTON, April 19, 2023** – Adapting to change has been a hallmark of Historic New England’s campus on Cambridge Street since construction of Otis House in the late eighteenth century. Today as the neighborhood continues to evolve, Historic New England is working with the City of Boston and cultural and urban design firm NADAAA to redefine its Otis House campus as a civic anchor in the community.

**Creating a community resource and civic anchor**

The Otis House campus comprises the 1796 Otis mansion and two connected nineteenth-century row houses located at the nexus of Beacon Hill and the West End on a rapidly changing section of Cambridge Street. Construction is underway to expand the Mass General Brigham Hospital complex, and redevelopment plans are in process for the state’s Charles F. Hurley Building and the Boston Public Library West End branch site.

“Historic New England is committed to being a leading voice for community livability and collaboration, and a resource for neighborhood transformation across the region,” said Historic New England President and CEO Vin Cipolla. “The Otis House campus has great potential to become a vibrant, inclusive, and welcoming community resource. We’re embracing this opportunity to collaborate and re-envision how our significant spaces on Cambridge Street can become an even stronger civic anchor.” Currently, Historic New England’s campus houses the organization’s Library and Archives, Otis House museum, program space, and staff offices.

**Collaborating with the City of Boston**

As Historic New England prepares for investments in and improvements to the Otis House campus it is working closely with the city on plans for redevelopment on the site of the current West End branch library next door. On April 3, the Mayor’s Office of Housing issued its [Request for Proposals for Real Estate, Housing with Public Access: West End Library](#) which identifies two priorities for the site: “A new branch library space that is aesthetically stunning, with the expanded programming capacity to flexibly accommodate the needs of a growing community; and the creation of new units of affordable housing that will make this vibrant neighborhood accessible to families and individuals from all walks of life.”

Following a public planning process in which Historic New England participated and neighbors and community leaders spoke about the importance of a contextual relationship between the new building

and Otis House, the city incorporated Otis House synergy into its RFP. The Guidelines and Objectives state, “Historic New England is engaged in its own ambitious planning project to reimagine the Otis House complex as a civic and cultural anchor in the community and welcomes collaboration in this effort. Proponents are encouraged to consider opportunities to collaborate with Historic New England to create a shared cultural district or shared educational experience between the Otis House and the library branch.” Historic New England is evaluating the potential of the Otis House complex as a community anchor for expanded public experiences both inside and outside, income generation to support sustainability, and restoration of the 1796 mansion.

### **Continuing Library and Archives access**

As this evaluation and planning process progresses, Historic New England is taking steps to ensure continued care for and access to its Library and Archives. In preparation for a move from Otis House to nearby interim space at 85 Merrimac Street, the Library and Archives temporarily closed on April 15. During this period of closure, staff members are fully engaged in preparing the new space and managing the move of hundreds of thousands of archival materials, including the fragile glass plate negatives collection.

“We’re delighted to be relocating to a historic building so close to Otis House that offers modern amenities for our archives operation for the next three to five years as we plan for the Otis House complex transformation and the Historic New England Center for Preservation and Collections in Haverhill, Massachusetts,” said Team Leader for Collection Services Julie Solz. “We look forward to announcing the reopening of the Library and Archives this fall and, in the meantime, invite everyone to explore the large selection of our collections that is digitized and accessible through our [Collections Access Portal](#).”

### **Sharing the Otis House history of adaptation**

From the moment Otis House was constructed in 1796 among other fine homes, the community around it was transforming. As these residents gradually moved to Beacon Hill and later to Back Bay, the West End neighborhood became an important African American community and eventually home to a variety of immigrant groups. The built environment around Otis House became denser and supported mixed use.

When the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) purchased Otis House in 1916, the building included storefronts at street level, and had been used as a two-family home and a boarding house. In 1925, Cambridge Street was widened, and Otis House was moved back and attached to two c. 1840 row houses on Lynde Street with their own adaptive reuse history.

In the 1950s when Urban Renewal devastated the West End, Otis House and the two row houses remained as a cultural refuge. Otis House, Old West Church, and the West End library branch became a cultural enclave for historic Beacon Hill and new West End development. Now, more than seventy years later, the Otis House museum survives as a rare late-eighteenth-century freestanding house in Boston.

“We have such a compelling, multi-faceted story to offer visitors to Otis House because the building’s history really reflects how an urban neighborhood evolved over time,” said Metro Boston Regional Site Administrator Cynthia Cowan, adding that the Otis House museum remains open, welcoming visitors for tours Friday through Sunday, June through October. Information and tickets are available at [www.historicnewengland.org/property/otis-house/](http://www.historicnewengland.org/property/otis-house/).

### **Creating a companion cultural center in Haverhill**

Historic New England’s reimagining of the Otis House complex is running in parallel with the organization’s transformation of its collections care campus in downtown Haverhill into the Historic New England Center for Preservation and Collections, a major initiative that is in the early stages of planning. Historic New England’s Haverhill campus currently comprises the eight-story Lang Building, a former shoe manufactory constructed in the early twentieth century, and associated parking lots.

“Our goal is to create a dynamic public center that will also serve as a catalyst for the creation of a cultural district within Haverhill,” said Cipolla. “As a cultural leader, we have an exciting opportunity to leverage and expand our extensive collections and physical spaces in partnership with public, private, and commercial organizations. Both the Otis House and Haverhill initiatives allow us to push the envelope on the contemporary role of preservation in New England communities, and reinforce Historic New England’s commitment to livability, resilience, and collaboration.”

### **About Historic New England**

[Historic New England](http://www.historicnewengland.org/), founded as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1910, is the largest and most comprehensive independent preservation organization in the US and welcomes the public to thirty-eight exceptional museums and landscapes, including several coastal farms. The organization operates a major collections and archives center in Haverhill, Massachusetts, and has the world’s largest collection of New England artifacts, comprising more than 125,000 decorative arts and objects, and 1.5 million archival documents including photographs, architectural drawings, manuscripts, and ephemera. Engaging education programs for youth, adults, and preservation professionals, and award-winning exhibitions and publications are offered in person and virtually. The Historic New England Preservation Easement Program is a national leader and protects 120 privately owned historic properties throughout the region.