

History and Memories:

The Hidden Stories of East Somerville

Walking Tour led by Edward Gordon – September 23, 2007



During the mid-to-late 1800s, East Somerville was one of the most densely settled parts of the City. The 1852 Map of Somerville provides a very clear picture of how the neighborhood developed. A few streets, such as Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Vernon, and Perkins, were set out

near Somerville's border with Charlestown. One major asset of this neighborhood was its topography – the level terrain of the area between Broadway and Pearl Street was perfect for house building. Beyond Pearl Street, to the south, the land dropped off dramatically in the direction of Washington Street. East Somerville had fine soil for drainage, as well as clay for brick and pottery making. Industry was located on the edges of the area. For example, brewing, varnish-making, and manufacture of rubber products were found to the north in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown, whereas brick making, spike manufacturing, and potteries were located to the south, along and near Washington Street.

During the 1840's East Somerville experienced more extensive subdivision activity than other areas of the community. In contrast to Spring Hill and portions of Prospect Hill and Winter Hill, where large lots were created affording spacious residences, the eastern part of the town was set out with a more urban development model in mind, complete with a modified grid system of narrow streets and less ample house lots. In its earliest days, the 1840s to early 1870s, East Somerville was settled by a comfortable middle-class that commuted to businesses in Boston. Their commute was made possible by the introduction of the Boston and Maine Railroad through Charlestown's Sullivan Station located just to the north. For example, in 1845, Charles Pierce laid out 69 lots between Pearl, Perkins, Franklin, and Pinckney Streets. A plan of lots clearly shows their proximity to public transportation, only 1,090 feet from the railway depot.

East Somerville remained a fashionable residential enclave until the turn-of-the-twentieth century. After 1900, some houses were subdivided, and three-deckers were built on the few remaining undeveloped parcels.

1. 8 Mt. Pleasant Street

The Carpenter Gothic cottage at 8 Mt. Pleasant Street may pre-date Somerville's incorporation as a town separate from the mother town of Charlestown. Built in 1841-1842, its original owner was Perkins Norton, a Charlestown trader. From 1849 until at least the mid 1880s Daniel Worthen, a distiller, owned the house. Although its original clapboards are now obscured by stucco, this dwelling retains its leafy saw-cut bargeboards at its main facade.



2. 65-67 Perkins Street

Due to its proximity to industries located around Washington Street and its convenience to public transportation via the Boston and Lowell RR, East Somerville attracted families of means, such as Gustavus Prescott, the first owner of 65-67 Perkins Street and a merchant by trade. This remarkably intact Greek Revival double house was built during the 1840s at a time when East Somerville was just beginning to evolve into a desirable neighborhood. Still intact is the colonnaded portico with fluted Doric columns, the flush boarding of the lower story, and the original wood window sash.

3. 77 Perkins Street

Mixed in with the more substantial housing are more modest residences such as 77 Perkins Street, originally home to the Bailey family of bakers. The building was originally part of the house next door which had been a sister building to 65-67 Perkins Street. Both buildings had been part of a small hotel complex.



4. Mt. Vernon/Perkins Street

The small, five-building proposed expansion of an existing Local Historic District at Perkins and Mt. Vernon Streets encompasses stylish and substantial examples of houses dating from the second half of the nineteenth century.

84 Perkins Street

The house at 84 Perkins Street built in 1870-1871 introduces a type of domestic architecture that is well represented in East Somerville—the substantial, well-proportioned Mansard residence. The original owner was Charles A. Dole, a foreman for Stickley and Poor, Spice and Pickles of Charlestown, and then the Doles family lived here until the early 1900s.



46 Mt. Vernon Street

46 Mt. Vernon Street ranks among the best-detailed Queen Anne residences in Somerville. For many years, this house built ca. 1885, was the residence of George S. Poole, Secretary of the Warren Institute of Savings.

47 Mt. Vernon Street

47 Mt. Vernon Street provides evidence that as late as 1885 the Italianate style was alive and well in the eastern part of the City—here round arched windows, wooden brackets, and distinctive massing at the central pavilion are all still intact. The house's first owner was Fred Coburn, a stationer.



50 Mt. Vernon Street

Blending a Queen Anne, end gable form with Colonial Revival elements, this well-preserved residence might be called the house that burlap built because its first owner Thomas L. Davis was a burlap dealer in Boston. The house built in 1895 is noteworthy for its front porch, complete with paired Doric columns, as well as bold scroll brackets beneath the gable's overhang.



51 Mt. Vernon Street

Frederick Hosmer, a poultry dealer at Faneuil Hall Market, hired an unidentified architect to design this house in 1892. It is a good example of a center hall Colonial Revival house providing evidence that East Somerville was still a fashionable address at the close of the nineteenth century.



5. 64 Mt. Vernon Street

This house was built ca. 1870 for Charles S. Powers, a local grain dealer. By 1885 it was still owned by Powers but now also housed a men's social club called The Webcowit Club. The club was reportedly fairly exclusive—limited to prominent businessmen and intended "to promote social discourse." During the late 1800s numerous social/charitable men's clubs bearing Native American names sprang up throughout New England, along with organizations like the Elks and The Knights of Columbus. More typically, these clubs were housed in the upper floors of commercial blocks in business districts.

6. Pearl Street District:

31, 32, 35 Pearl Street

This trio of residences could constitute a small local historic district. Built in 1896, 31 Pearl Street is a towered Queen Anne residence built for Henry S. Wright, a milk can manufacturer. The architect was Shepard S. Woodcock, who was honored by author Edward S. Samuels in his renowned book Somerville Past and Present (1897), where a photograph of this house is featured.

Built in 1887, 32 Pearl Street illustrates a very different approach to the Queen Anne style. It exhibits a rectangular end gable form and a broad 2-story bay at the first floor. The house was built for an Irish family headed by Charles Callahan, whose occupation is undetermined.

35 Pearl Street is a compact Queen Anne/Colonial Revival residence that was built in 1894 for Nathan Reed, owner of a prosperous local iron foundry. The wrap-around porch and complex roof configuration call attention to a residence that was honored by its inclusion in Somerville Past and Present (1897).



7. Florence Street District:

46 Pearl Street

Despite its present precarious situation—shorn of its clapboards and rear ell-- 46 Pearl Street manages to convey—through siting, form and proportions—a sense of its original elegance as a Mansard residence. It was probably built around 1870 by neighborhood carpenter Alonzo Bowers. This house is a key component in Pearl Street's collection of substantial and stately Mansard residences that approach mansion scale. The first owner was Ezra D. Conant, a wholesale grocer in Boston, as well as one of the first Aldermen of the newly incorporated City of Somerville. He was also the developer of one of the rowhouses on Florence Street.

39-43, 42-44, 45-47, 46-48 and 50-52 Florence Street

A combination of variable terrain and decidedly urbane architecture accounts for much of this area's interest. The flat, elevated plane of



Pearl Street quickly shifts to a steep hillside that descends to Washington Street. The Florence Street properties constitute a kind of urban oasis within a suburban housing context—here, brick row houses that would look at home in Boston neighborhoods, as well as wooden multi-family Queen Anne residences of unique design were built during the period of 1870-1885. Herbert Cole, a bridge constructor, built the wooden apartments at 46-48 and 50-52 Florence Street that feature steep front steps and A-shaped, typically

Queen Anne gables containing raised sunburst motifs.

8. 70 Pearl Street

Returning to Pearl Street, another substantial, well-proportioned Mansard residence at #70 is worth viewing. Built in 1870-1871, the original owner Edward Burke prospered as a shipmaster and his vessel is thought to have been moored off of Charlestown. The mansard's patterned shingles and shallow, gable-roofed dormers are still intact.

9. 75, 77 and 81 Pearl Street



Before heading north up Franklin Street, take a look at three side-by-side residences at 75, 77 and 81 Pearl Street. Their charm derives from their vernacular elements, especially the saw-cut bargeboards and the columns of the front porch.



10. 1 Webster Street

As we head north towards Broadway stop to consider the Italianate house at 1 Webster Street. Built in 1851-1852 this house dates to the earliest phase of the neighborhood's

development. Built around 1890 for John C. Edgerly, a Boston dealer, the house later acquired a wrap-around verandah and an oriel window that projects from the second floor of the main façade, due to the efforts of Dr. Sanford Hanscom, the third owner of the house.

11. 157 Perkins Street

Situated at the corner of Franklin and Perkins Streets, 157 Perkins Street is an interesting example of the transitional Federal Greek Revival style of the mid-1850s.

12. 8 Franklin Street



In recent years, the current owner of 8 Franklin Street has restored and renovated this end gable Queen Anne house, built in 1890. Possessing a design that reflects the conservatism of the local building trades, the original owner was John T. Chandler, a Boston and Maine Railroad inspector.

Turning westward onto Broadway, the tour route double backs in an easterly direction. At this point we will consider the commercial and municipal buildings directly on Broadway, a major thoroughfare that serves as the gateway to Somerville as one comes from Charlestown and the City of Boston. The story of commerce along this street begins around the time that the horse drawn trolley was introduced in the 1850s. Long before this--in fact going back as far as the 1600s-- Broadway was an important highway. Indeed it figured as part of the infamous "Midnight Ride" that Paul Revere took on horseback to reach Lexington and Concord on April 18, 1775. Although the route of the Middlesex Canal was completed in 1803 and extended through East Somerville--several blocks north of Broadway-- it triggered little development in the area. One noteworthy exception was the node of buildings, including a tavern, in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown, which was the southern terminus of the canal.

13. 165 Broadway, aka Senior Center & former Fire Station

This red brick building was built in 1895 as Fire House Engine No. 2. Without its original details it is difficult to recognize that it is stylistically an early Florentine Palace. (See photo on poster.) Designed as a fire station it provides evidence of the high density of the East Somerville neighborhood after 1890, and notably accelerated after the electric trolley was introduced around 1900. Towards the end of the twentieth century the building became home to the community's elders as a senior center, as well as to the youth of the City.

14. Row Houses at 8-16 Cross Street

This group was built at the behest of Samuel Klous, a brick maker and land developer. Currently in rough condition, these row houses were built around 1880 in the Mansard or Second Empire style that at that time was nearing the end of its popularity.

15. East Somerville Public Library, 115 Broadway

This east branch of the Somerville Library system was built with funds provided by Andrew Carnegie in 1918. It provides evidence of the great steel magnate's generosity in the realm of educational and cultural community resources during the early 20th Century. A native of Scotland, Carnegie came from a background of limited means, but as a youth he was afforded access to the private library of a wealthy family. He credits this turn of events with helping him to become a successful "captain of industry," and this inspired Carnegie to fund hundreds of libraries throughout the United States and Great Britain.

16. Former Theatre/Future Home of Mudflats Studio

Located at 79-83 Broadway, Hurst's Broadway Theatre was built in 1915. By the late 1920s, Somerville had six theatres—today only one of these is still in operation as a theatrical venue, the Somerville Theatre in Davis Square. The Hurst was built by the Somerville Home Building Association for Star Theatres Incorporated. The theatre had a capacity for 1,850 patrons and was in operation until the late 1940s. In 1933, Arthur N. Viano, who built the Teele Square Theatre, also owned the Broadway Theatre under the name of "Viano's Broadway," and it was located behind a façade of storefronts—an arrangement that was fairly typical at the time.

17. Franklin Building

Built in 1919 from designs provided by an unknown architect, the Franklin Building is a brick and concrete commercial building with stylistic references to the Classical Revival, and can be seen as an antecedent to the Art Deco style. Originally this building was

associated with the Winter Hill Cooperative Bank and the Somerville Institute for Savings.

18. Columbia Building

Situated at 84-86 Broadway, this yellow brick building was constructed in 1902 by the Columbia Associates, a fraternal organization composed of 50 members whose president was J. S. Newcomb, a Somerville realtor. Designed in the Colonial Revival style by E.L. Clark, the Columbia was built to house 5 stores on the ground floor, with a club room, club offices and other club-related rooms on the second floor. Commercial concerns that located here in the early 20th century included a real estate company, drug store, beauty shop, dentist, and the like. Among the fraternal organizations that once used this building were the Paul Revere Lodge, Home Circle, and the Knights of Honor.

19. St Benedicts Church and Rectory



St Benedict's Roman Catholic Church at 25 Hathorn Street was built in 1911 from designs provided by archdiocesan architect Edward Sheehan. The church is of interest as a relatively rare example of the Mission and Spanish Colonial Revival

styles. Although the church's original corner tower has been removed, the interior remains remarkably intact, well-detailed and lavishly appointed. Blending Midwestern Prairie style with Classical Revival elements, the church's rectory at 25 Arlington Street was built in 1934. St Benedict's Roman Catholic Church has been long associated with the Italian community residing in East Somerville.

Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone

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20. Arlington Street

This circa 1858 Italianate house benefited from a circa late 1880s remodeling that incorporated Eastlake elements. Charles Locke Eastlake was an English architectural critic and home décor tastemaker who championed a distinctive, highly geometric style, mostly within the realm of furniture, but occasionally his favored ornamentation found its way onto the exterior of houses. During the late 19th century, the owner of this house was Charles Williams Jr., a protégé of Alexander Bell, the well-known inventor of the telephone. Bell and Watson's first telephone was developed in Williams' electrical shop at 109 Court Street in Boston in 1875. Reportedly the world's first outdoor experimental telephone line traversed between 1 Arlington Street in Somerville and 109 Court Street in Boston, three miles away. Williams paid for the wire, the labor and the housetop brackets.

This East Somerville Walking Tour was sponsored by East Somerville Main Streets (ESMS), in collaboration with the City's Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC). The research is based largely upon the survey work recently completed by the City's two architectural consultants, Edward Gordon and Arthur Krim. Hired through state and federal grants, they have helped the Commission to identify significant properties in East Somerville, and recommend them for designation as "local historic districts."

Established in 1985, the SHPC administers historic districts, advises homeowners, and provides historic and technical information. The Commission also sponsors events and develops programs and written materials as part of its public outreach and educational mission. The Staff can be reached via 617.625-6600 ext. 2500 or www.ci.somerville.ma.us/historicpreservation.

The mission of ESMS, initiated by Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone in 2006, is to help build East Somerville as a thriving, safe, friendly neighborhood and commercial district that welcomes cultural diversity and offers a variety of businesses, which both serve and employ residents. East Somerville Main Streets can be reached via (617) 741-0230 or carrie@eastsoverllemainstreets.org