

# A SAMPLING OF INDUSTRIAL SOMERVILLE: PAST AND PRESENT

## 12th Annual Historic Bike Tour – Sunday, May 12, 2013

Sponsored by the

Somerville Historic Preservation Commission

and the

Somerville Bike Committee



Welcome! Today we will simply introduce you to some of the more concentrated industrial areas of Somerville. You will see how many have evolved over time, but are still shaping the character of our landscape and tax base. Some of the original buildings have already been converted to new functions, and some are still in transition, waiting for new visions and entrepreneurs. As in most cities, industrial sites are scattered throughout the community, and can often be found nestled in residential neighborhoods, as well as in focused districts. Enjoy the ride, observe the rules of the road, and come back again, to explore in more depth the areas we only pedal through briefly. And Happy Mother's Day to all, both with us and not!

### WARD II

This neighborhood is a very densely settled section of the City bisected by the **Fitchburg line of the Boston & Maine Railroad** (1836). Residential dwellings coexist with large industrial complexes along both sides of the B & M right-of-way. Abutting Union Square, it also has some localized commercial development along its three important roads: Washington Street, Somerville Avenue, and Beacon Street.

Ward II is one of the oldest and most active industrial areas in Somerville. Its flat topography, proximity to the Millers River, and location in the southeastern section of the City near the Boston and Cambridge lines made it ideal for industrial development. One of the first industries to settle in this area was the **Middlesex Bleachery and Dye Works**, ca. 1820. It was also the site of **Bay State Smelting** until the 1990's. Both structures have been demolished, enabling the City to create the expansive recreational facilities and fields at **Conway Park**. The Bleachery, which operated up through the 1930s, used the water power of the nearby Millers River for their operations. In 1836 the Fitchburg railroad line was established, running west through the lower portion of Ward 2. The coming of the railroad further stimulated the growth of this area, and by the Civil War a number of industries were located along the railway.

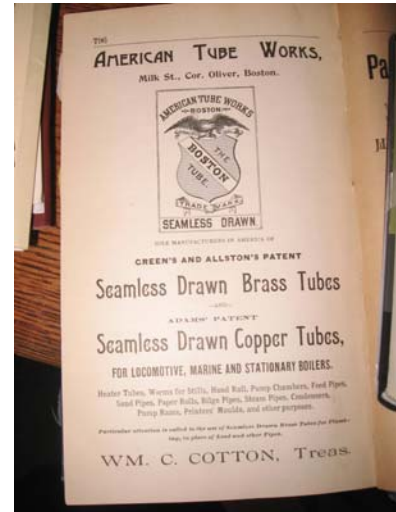


Probably the largest and most significant of these industries was the **Union Glass Works**, 1854, which made glass lighting fixtures, and operated up through the 1930s. Although no structures remain for either the Bleachery or Union Glass, the sites along Somerville Avenue and Webster Streets are well documented and have archaeological potential. In the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, Ward II continued to develop its industrial base. Most of the buildings included in the district date from this period. The businesses represented a variety of industries including **I.H. Brown Moulding Company**, a mill work company, ca. 1880 (285 Washington Street), **Miller Bros. & Co.**, a coffin factory, 1881 (11 Miller Street), **Fresh Pond Ice**, ca. 1892,

(321 Washington Street) and **Metropolitan Ice Company**, ca. 1915 (Bleachery Court. There is also **Peter Forg**, 1892, an architectural hardware manufacturer (48-50 Park Street), **The American Tube Works**, 1890-1920, a tube manufacturer (440-460 Somerville Avenue and Lake Street), and **T.F. McGann**, 1909, a bronze smeltery (27 Village Street).

Most of the large industrial sites were filled by the early years of the 20th century and relatively little development occurred after 1920. Many of the complexes currently house active industrial or commercial concerns and have experienced alterations over time. Despite these changes the buildings still retain their industrial appearance and function, and form a distinct linear arrangement related to the railroad.

One of the most significant industries in Ward II and one where the buildings (1890-1935) are still standing and actively occupied, although not by the same industry, is the **American Tube Works Company**. Hence, here is some background on the company. It was founded in 1851 by Joseph H. Cotton, Holmes Hinkley, and Daniel F. Child and was the first American company to manufacture seamless brass and copper tubes. The company was almost immediately successful, and by 1865 it was the second largest employer in Somerville with 175 employees and a production output of \$1.2 million worth of brass and copper tubing. In 1875, the firm acquired two patents, one for a tube-drawing mandrel issued August 3, 1875, and one for seamless metal tubes registered on July 20, 1875. The company remained under the control and management of the Cotton family for multiple generations. In 1933, Walter E. O'Hara of Fall River acquired a controlling interest in the company, thereby ending the ownership of the company by the Cotton family. At the time of this purchase, the company was reputed to be the largest manufacturer of copper pipes and tubes in the country.



The growth experienced by the company in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed them to completely rebuild their production plant. Beginning in 1890 and continuing until at least 1920, they completely rebuilt the complex and modernized their production facilities. All of the extant structures date from that modernization effort. As part of the expansion, they acquired all the land between Dane Street, Somerville Avenue, Church Street, and the railroad tracks, with the exception of the City's cemetery (now known as the **Milk Row Cemetery**, 1804). The company remained in Somerville until 1934, the year after Walter O'Hara gained control of the organization. It is not listed in the 1935 Somerville City Directory, and in 1936 a Cambridge address is given for the company. A cluster of the buildings was later used by the.

Since the American Tube Works ended its Somerville productions, the remaining buildings in the complex have been used for various commercial and industrial functions, including by H.P. Hood Company as part of their egg department. Beginning in the 1930's **Ames Safety Envelope Company**, a family-owned business who offered many benefits to its employees, moved its paper manufacturing business to Somerville and operated out of many of the buildings until its closing at the end of 2010. In more recent decades the occupants have been metal fence manufacturers, a boxing club, auto body repair shops, self-storage, and small professional and commercial offices.

The only buildings in the complex that will be passed by on this tour, at the very end, are on Lake Street. The industrial complex on Lake Street consists of two principal brick buildings: a three-story, and a long, one-story structure. One can see a stone date block of "1918" centered between windows and vents on the three-story building, and a similar date block of "1912" on the one-story building, as well as a tall, metal smokestack painted with "H.D. Chasen."



**Peter Forg Company**, 1892+, 50 Park St., a manufacturer of hardware specialties and heavy metal stampings. As one of the oldest and still active companies in Somerville, it was started fabricating furniture hardware in a small shop on Bow Street in 1884. The existing two-story brick factory at 50 Park St. was built eight years later. The products were builders' and cabinet hardware. In 1912 the Board of Trade wrote that "the several lines of specialties go principally to the wholesale hardware trade, and one of the notable products is an adjustable electric light fixture." The oldest portion of the factory is set back from Park St. behind a more recent addition (post 1930). In 1900 the original factory was occupied by a machine shop on the first floor and tool making on the second.

**561 Windsor Street** lies within the larger **Boynton Yards district**, which draws its name from one of its major industries in the early to mid-20th century – meatpacking. Many of these plants were located in the area between Prospect Street and the current McGrath Highway, on both sides of the railroad tracks, and where the Millers River once flowed. Company names included Squire Meatpacking, North Meatpacking, and Millbrook Storage (still extant) which was where the meat was once kept cold after slaughtering. Some of the plants specialized in sheep, and others in pigs and cattle. In 1957 #561 housed the Consolidated Bag and Foil Corporation and Sugarman Brothers, and the Bushway Ice Cream Factory was nearby in 1951. Today the building contains a mix of commercial and industrial uses, and retains some of its manufacturing flavor, in the form of Taza chocolate makings. Stop by sometime for a scheduled tour and some samples

[www.tazachocolate.com](http://www.tazachocolate.com)



### **BRICKBOTTOM**

Boundaries for this area are considered to be the railroad tracks of the Boston & Lowell and Fitchburg Railroad tracks, Somerville Avenue, and Washington Street. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century Brickbottom was an area of clay pits associated with brick-making operations. While the Irish constituted a sizable percentage of the neighborhood Brickbottom was, in fact, a melting pot. Represented within its small area were families of Portuguese, Italian, Greek, and Eastern European Jewish heritage. During the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these ethnic groups were drawn to Brickbottom's inexpensive rental housing, as well as its proximity to jobs in nearby factories and to commercial concerns in Union Square.

In 1925, the Brickbottom neighborhood was bisected by the Northern Artery, later the McGrath Highway. This division created by the new transportation corridor's presence hastened the area's transition from residential to light industrial and commercial. One result of this change of use was the shift in its scale, from one of modest, low-rise wooden residences to larger masonry buildings. Gradually replacing the neighborhood's houses were the long rectangular forms of garages, warehouses and light industrial structures constructed of brick, concrete and metal. The two five-story warehouse and bakery components of the A&P complex are the tallest buildings ever built in Brickbottom; therefore, for reasons of height alone, this complex is a major East Somerville landmark.

**3-5 Fitchburg Street, aka Brickbottom Artist Building.** The multi-building commercial complex, was built from 1920 -1923 to serve as a distribution center for the food products of the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P) supermarket chain. Three of the four original

early 1920s A & P buildings are still extant. The complex was designed to keep up with the demand for food products sold at the A&P's far-flung stores. The grocery warehouse provided space for the temporary storage and canning of food products. Baked goods were produced as well as stored within the bakery. To insure that the goods were delivered as expeditiously as possible to the Company's stores, an auto repair shop for trucks was constructed on the northeast side of this distribution center.

The construction of the A&P complex at the margins of the Brick Bottom neighborhood during the early 1920s represents an important late development in the history of Somerville's southeastern industrial/commercial zone.

In 1984, a group of artists came together, in search of a stable and affordable working and living environment. They eventually purchased the semi-abandoned buildings of the A&P complex at 1 Fitchburg Street. The Brickbottom Artist Association has become a well-known model for other artists' live/work developments throughout the country. Today, the nearly 150 condominium spaces, each of a unique size, shape and design, serve as both home and workspace to BAA member artists and non-artists alike.

[www.brickbottomartists.com/](http://www.brickbottomartists.com/)



### INNER BELT INDUSTRIAL PARK

This large area is located at the eastern border of Somerville, and is bounded by Cambridge, Boston, and Washington Streets, and the McGrath Highway. In the 18th century the area was known as Cobble Hill and was the site of a large well-landscaped estate built by Joseph Barrell. In the 19th century this estate was taken over by the McLean Hospital as the location for the first insane asylum in New England and the area was known as Asylum Hill. During this time it took on its industrial character. The marshy area surrounding the asylum was used for brick-making and it sat at the junction of several railroad lines. Industrial use kept residential development confined to tenements and boarding houses, and by the turn of the century McLean Asylum had moved to a suburban location.

Sadly all of the buildings on the former estate have been demolished, although one stunning architectural remnant remains in the City; the staircase from the Barrell mansion has been integrated into the grand room of the Somerville Museum on Westwood Road, the terminus for this tour. One Cobble Hill was gradually used as fill and by 1950 most of the area was razed for redevelopment. The few buildings that remain are largely from the first years of the 20th century. However, Somerville Smelting (14 Joy Street) and parts of the Kiley Wagon Shop (Linwood Avenue) date from the mid- to late 19th century. Joy Street was named in honor of President George Washington's Consul to the Far East, Benjamin Joy, who was also the son-in-law of Joseph Barrell.



**86 Joy Street, aka Joy Street Artist Studios.** This expansive facility was built in 1919 for \$85,000 for the New England Baking Company, who occupied it until at least 1933. Located along the Boston and Lowell railroad, the building was designed by L. S. Beardsley of New York and constructed by the Fred T. Ley Company of Springfield. Ley also built the United States Post Office and a number of buildings at Fort Devens. It was originally designed with a concrete



driveway the whole length of the facade to facilitate the loading of teams and it had a special siding in the rear for railroad car access. The New England Bakery Company was one of 41 bakeries located in Somerville in 1920, so that by 1927 wholesale bakeries appear as a separate heading in City directories, with the New England Bakery being one of three listed. In the 1930s and 1940s the building was occupied by the Hall Baking Company, and some fondly recall it as the Happy Home Bakery, which would greet you at the door with a basket of goodies. It currently houses a diversity of non-residential artist work studios. [www.joystreetstudios.com/](http://www.joystreetstudios.com/)

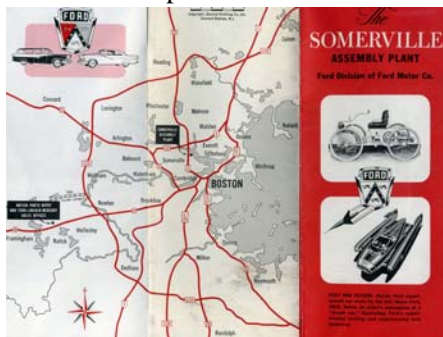
Next we will head up Washington Street toward Assembly Square, via Myrtle St. Fair warning this is the steepest part of the entire ride, getting us over the top of Ploughed or Mt Benedicts Hill, and giving us an opportunity to see a former industrial building that housed the Nobles Milk garage. The structure was expanded and converted to 9 residential condominium lofts ca. 2000.

## ASSEMBLY SQUARE

Assembly Square lies in the northeastern section of the City, along the banks of the Mystic River, adjacent to the cities of Boston and Medford. Its present name is derived from the Ford automobile assembly plant once located in the area from 1926-1957. The history of Assembly Square is strongly related to its location along the Mystic River and its proximity to rail service. Historically the area was a low-lying tidal marsh of the Mystic River. Because of poor drainage and the area's wet, clay soils, the tidal flats were undesirable for farming or settlement. For many years it was part of the vast Ten Hills estate of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was here in 1636, along the banks of the Mystic River, that Winthrop launched the first ship built in the Massachusetts colony. This has prompted the area near the current boathouse to be known as "The Blessing of the Bay" where we can enjoy river views and a rest stop.

The Assembly Square area in its earlier days was commonly called Mystic Flats or the Dirty Marshes. It was skirted on its southern perimeter by the Middlesex Canal in 1801, but remained largely undeveloped until the Boston and Maine and Eastern Railroads were built across the eastern edge of the flats in 1845 and 1854. Between the 1850s and 1870s the area's clay soils were used for brick-making, an important 18th and 19th century industry in Somerville. In the 1870s, North Union and Tenney Streets were laid out along the southern edge of the area. The tenements and occasional commercial properties along these streets existed to serve laborers in the nearby brickyards as well as railroad workers. The streets have since been eliminated.

During the next few decades the eastern and southern portions of the Flats were gradually filled in as the Charlestown railroad yard expanded and industrial areas grew along the rail lines. Large scale development of the flats, however, did not occur until the 1920s. In 1925, the Northern Artery (the McGrath and O'Brien Highway) was completed connecting with the Fellsway, improving and expanding north/south travel. In 1926, the **Ford Motor Company** opened a large automobile assembly plant in Mystic Flats. The plant produced up to 400 cars a day and represented one of the largest industrial developments in Boston. Also in 1926, the **First National Stores** opened a large bakery, produce, packaging, and warehouse complex adjacent to the Ford plant. The First National facilities included a separate car and truck garage as well as a large shipping and receiving facility located on a spur line of the B & M railroad (Mystic Warehouse).



During the 1930s and 1940s the rest of Assembly Square was developed with various uses. Many industries found the area to be a desirable industrial location because of its excellent rail service, proximity to Boston, flat topography, and accessibility to a large labor pool. More recent uses included **Cubby Oil**, an oil dealer, a **Sears Roebuck & Company warehouse** (more recently home to Paperama and Greybar), the **H.K. Porter Company** as

a tool manufacturing company, and **Central Steel**, a metal and steel fabricating company. All of these buildings were demolished in the first part of the new millennium in anticipation of a mixed use development community through a public-private partnership with the City and private investors. [www.assemblyrow.com/](http://www.assemblyrow.com/)



During the late 1950s and into the 1960s Assembly Square businesses began to gradually decline. The Ford Assembly plant closed in 1957 after assembling the unsuccessful Edsel and the facility was taken over by **First National Stores**. Improved truck and automobile routes such as 1-93, constructed in the early 1960s, made less constricted suburban locations appealing to businesses seeking to expand or modernize their facilities. In the late 1960s Sears

closed their warehouse at Assembly Square. By the 1970s First National, then the largest employer in Somerville, began consolidating their New England operations in Connecticut, and by 1977 they too had closed their Assembly Square facilities.

**5 Middlesex Avenue** is a very large, four-story, warehouse building that has been rehabilitated, ca. 1985, and converted to office use. The building was originally much larger with a food processing facility on the north façade and loading docks on the south; however these elements were all removed during the conversion. The building was constructed in 1941 as a Sears Roebuck and Co. warehouse facility and it was part of the enormous First National Stores, Inc. warehouse and food processing plant. The plant was designed by Monks and Johnson, a Boston architectural firm, and constructed between 1927 and 1929. It included a bakery, produce and food packaging facilities, a warehouse and a garage.



## POWDERHOUSE/WINTER HILL INDUSTRIAL AREA

The industrial area is located in both the Winter Hill and Powderhouse neighborhoods. Both are largely residential and commercial areas that experienced their largest growth in the period after the Civil War. The neighborhoods were bisected by the Boston and Lowell Railroad constructed in 1835, and the right-of-way was laid out to skirt the several large hills located in the City. Despite the early construction of the railroad, industrial development in this part of Somerville did not occur until the late 19th century when larger, more choice parcels in the eastern part of the City were already occupied.

The **Derby Desk Company** moved to Somerville in 1882 and constructed their first building on Vernon Street, a five-story frame factory (burned 1968), on the site of an old quarry. The company continued to expand on the site, running a successful office furniture manufacturing operation up through the 1940s. The 20th century industrial operations manufactured a mix of products, such as a corrugated box manufacturer (**Agar Manufacturing Co.**), and a sash and door company (**Carlisle - Ayer Company**). Two of the buildings in this district, **The Fruit Nut Cereal Company** and **Dad's Cookie Company**, were associated with the food manufacturing and distribution industry, one of Somerville's largest 20th century industries.



As industrial production in Somerville slowed in the later years of the 20th century, most of these companies have changed ownership and function, and several have been demolished for re-development (visit <http://www.maxwellsgreen.com/>) A few of the buildings in the district, however, are still in active use. The most imaginative may be occurring in the expansive former Derby Desk structure, now **Rogers Foam Co.**, which hosts several companies, and perhaps is best known to the public as **Vernon Street Artist Studios** [www.vernonstreet.com/open.html](http://www.vernonstreet.com/open.html)



## DAVIS SQUARE

This area was named for Person Davis, a 19th century grain merchant and landowner. The area was predominantly farms and homesteads until after the Civil War when it began to experience residential development pressure. By the 1870s, streetcar and railroad commuter service to Boston and Cambridge had extended west to the junction of Highland Avenue and Elm Street. By the late 1880s, the Square had a number of three-story brick commercial buildings and a few industrial buildings along the railroad tracks. During the first years of the 20th century and up until the mid-1930s, Davis Square continued to develop as a commercial center for the western portion of the City. Like Union Square, many of the first commercial buildings dating from the 1880s were replaced in the 1920s and 1930s, usually by smaller, one and two story structures.

**32 Clifton Avenue, aka Mixit Studios.** This large wood-frame building was constructed sometime between 1900 and 1924. During the 1920s the building was occupied by Uzeit Soap manufacturing. Then from 1927 through 1933 the building was the home of the Stromberg Refrigerator factory. By the late 1940s the building was again in use for the manufacture of soap. It was converted to live/work space for a variety of artists in the 1980's. It has retained its clapboard siding, but all of its windows have been replaced with 1/1 double-hung metal frame ones.



Diagonal to this current Mixit Studios were once two other buildings that added to the industrial flavor of the area, which has since become a predominantly residential neighborhood with high market values and an expanding local historic district along Morrison Avenue. Both of the following buildings were razed following a major explosion inside the building in 1998, and they have since been replaced by modern and high-end residential condominiums, which are clearly the trend for this very popular neighborhood, just outside Davis Square.

**80-84 Winslow Avenue** was built between 1910 and 1912 for the Walter S. Smith Auto Company. In addition to garage, supplies, and storage for autos, Mr. Smith was also a plumber and gasfitter. From 1918 through 1933, the property was known as the Winslow Avenue Garage. For a number of years it was owned by Annie E. Newton and the garage provided winter storage and renting of automobiles. In the late 1940s the building was used as a machine shop.

**88 Winslow Avenue, aka "Walker Garage."** This brick and terra cotta garage was constructed in 1911 by Andrew Walker. . The automobile business grew out of the earlier W.S. Smith & Co., which engaged in plumbing, gas fitting and heating. This garage may have been associated with the W. S. Smith Auto Co. located next door. In the 1930s a sign painter was located on the second floor, while cement burial vaults were manufactured on the first floor. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was designated as locally historic (1985) and the garage was used as sculptor studios, including for the well-known William Wainwright. He executed many unique kinetic sculptures, such as the Never Green Tree near the Cambridgeside Galleria. He died recently in 2012.



**373 Highland Avenue.** This former industrial building was once located along the Boston & Maine railroad tracks. It was constructed in 1923 for the A & W Hastings, a sash and door manufacturer established in 1852. By the 1920s they were one of four such companies listed in the City directories. In addition to doors and windows, the Hastings Company manufactured blinds, frames, weights, cords, and garage doors. Like many other manufacturers, in addition to their factory/warehouse location in Somerville, they also maintained an office in Boston (134-142



M. W. Carr and Company, 1916.

Friend Street). In more recent times the building was occupied by the New England Telephone Company, and then by M.W. Carr which had another factory on the west side of Davis Square, along the same railroad tracks. Both buildings have since been converted to residential units, and have taken advantage of their frontage on the former



rails, converted to a Community Path in the 1990's. This building was greatly enlarged, with new floors added, as well as an interior open core.

**48-50 Grove Street,** ca. 1924, was once situated along the Lexington and Arlington branch of the Boston & Maine Railroad. It was first occupied by three companies: the Arthur Harding Company, manufacturers of oil cans, the Hamilton and Parker Company, machinists and inventors, and The American Optical Company. The latter was owned by Carl G. Aldrich, who began work as a jewelry manufacturer at 154 Cedar Street, but by 1920 he was also manufacturing optical parts. In 1924 American Optical moved to 48-50 Grove Street. By 1929 the company, still owned by Aldrich, was called Continental Optical Corporation and shared space at this address with the AmRad Corporation, manufacturers of radios. By 1933 neither company appeared in City directories. More recently the building was used as a frozen food factory and a clothing manufacturer. In 1986 this brick, 3-story industrial building was renovated, and while the ground floor windows have been replaced, ones on the second and third floors are original. It is now occupied by professional offices, including architectural and legal.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES**

Most of the information has been excerpted from the Form B surveys prepared for the Massachusetts Historical Commission by the following architectural historians:

Carole Zellie and Peter Stott, Landscape Research in 1980-82.

Public Archaeology Laboratory (PAL), Inc., Pawtucket, R.I. in 1990 and 2010

Arthur Krim, Survey Systems and Edward W. Gordon, Public History Consulting, from 2005-2011

They have based their research on a wide diversity of sources, including Somerville City Directories, Martin Draper Map of Somerville, 1852, Hopkins Maps of 1874 and 1884, George Bromley's Atlas of the City of Somerville of 1895, Sanborn Maps 1900 – 1950, and Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville, MA, commissioned by the City, and published in 1982, Updated 1990, and now out of print.

**Thank you for joining us!**



**Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone**

