

“Changing Face of Historic Union Square”

An Architectural and Historical Walking Tour—September 2015

Led by Edward Gordon, President, Victorian Society in America, NE Chapter



Union Square is located at the intersection of two 17th century highways, and is the oldest and largest commercial district in Somerville. Both Washington Street (known first as the Road to Newtowne and later as the Road to Cambridge) and Somerville Avenue (originally Charlestown Lane) were established during the early 1630s. By the late eighteenth century Washington Street and Somerville Avenue were part of a system of roads known as Milk Row. Middlesex County farmers used Milk Row to access markets in City Square, Charlestown, and Faneuil Hall in the heart of Boston. For over a century horse-drawn carts loaded up with vegetables, milk, cheese, and the like were a familiar sight for the few families living along Milk Row during the late 1700s and early 1800s.

The Union Square area was an unlikely location to become one of the City's major commercial districts, as it is hemmed in between Prospect Hill on the north and the wetlands associated with the Miller's River, which was a waterway that once separated Somerville from Cambridge. The Miller's River was filled in 1874 to eliminate pollution by the slaughter houses who dumped unusable portions of the carcasses into the slow-moving river.

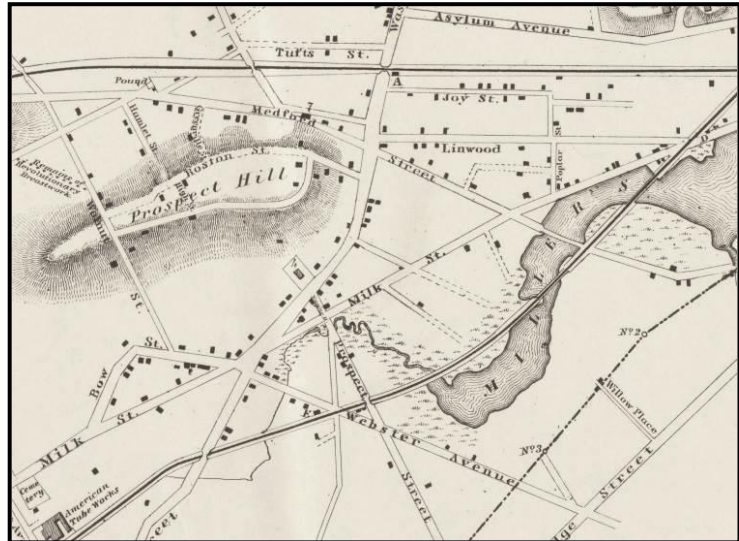
Around 1830, a particularly high profile improvement occurred as a result of early land reclamation in the marshy area on the south side of Union Square area -- Somerville Avenue was made to continue as a "straight shot" over former marshland from Carlton and Bow Streets eastward into the center of the square. This construction project meant Bow Street was no longer a segment along Somerville Avenue, but became a street in its own right that "bowed-out" from the main road.

By the mid-1830s, rail lines were beginning to flourish as a more expeditious way to transport farm products to distant urban markets. As railroad service expanded, commercial and residential development grew, both within and around the Square. In 1835, the Boston and Lowell Railroad opened its first station for passengers on the south side of Washington Street. In 1836, the Fitchburg Railroad was introduced to Union Square, and ran parallel to Milk Row/Somerville Avenue. Although originally constructed as a freight line, the Fitchburg Railroad by 1842 began carrying passengers and serving multiple stations in and around Union Square. Station locations included Webster Street (near Prospect Street) and Kent Street, to service early Spring Hill commuters. In 1845, horse car service was established between Union and Harvard Squares via Kirkland and Washington Streets. Each of these additions offered

Union Square residents an easy commute into Boston. Fast, efficient, and dependable public transit along these transportation corridors spurred not only rapid growth in the population, commercial businesses and industry, but also paved the way for “the land beyond the neck” to break away from Charlestown in 1842.

Indeed, the mid-nineteenth century witnessed the rise of several industries near Union Square, such as the **Union Glass Company** and **American Tube Works**, as well as numerous small woodworking shops, ice businesses, and carriage-making concerns. The success of these enterprises insured that Union Square was an important contributor to the commercial success of Somerville well into the twentieth century.

Around the time Somerville was separating from Charlestown, Union Square became known as “Sand Pit Square.” This was due to the sandy soil found in the clay pits that yielded a fine grade of silica for making glass and brick. During the 1850s, this crossroad briefly became known as “Liberty Pole Square,” referring to a flagpole erected by local firemen opposite Bow Street’s eastern intersection with Somerville Avenue. Then the name changed to Union Square in the 1860s when a recruitment office was set up in the center to enlist Somerville soldiers for the Union Army in the Civil War. Troops bound for battles in the southern states were stationed atop Prospect Hill.



Prior to the Civil War, Union Square had a decidedly residential appearance and Greek Revival architecture was the predominant style. as seen in the circa 1860 photograph below that shows both sides of Bow Street, from the long lost Liberty Pole in the heart of Union Square to its intersection with Summer Street on the west.



Interestingly, this photograph also depicts the building that preceded the 1874 Hill Building. This high profile triangular lot was once host to a substantial Greek Revival residence owned by the Hawkins family. This house had a columned porch projecting from its Bow Street façade.

After 1865, a major building boom transformed the appearance of Union Square, with the development of a dozen or more commercial blocks, primarily of brick with brownstone trim.

The designs of these commercial blocks were representative of the fashionable Italianate and Mansard styles, with some later examples of Queen Anne architectural design. These new masonry buildings introduced a higher density and concentration of sophisticated design that was

previously not found in Somerville. It seems that the era of the provincial house wright had ended by 1860 with the arrival of more highly educated and well-traveled architects.

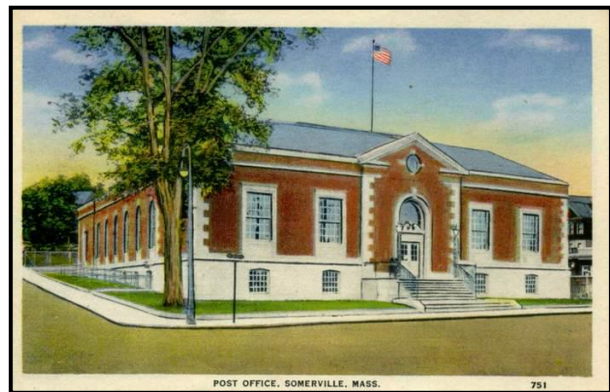
Today, little tangible evidence survives from the pre-Civil War era when Union Square appeared to be a neighborhood of wooden Greek Revival residences with a liberty (flag) pole in the center of the square. What little remains from this long lost “Greek Revival land” is the dwelling at 15 Union Square which was built as a residence in 1845, and later converted to commercial use, as it remains today as the Mid-Nite Convenience store.

Post-Civil War prosperity changed the appearance of Union Square as houses were replaced by masonry commercial blocks that ranged in height from three-to-four stories. The newly developed handsome business buildings show that their owners were familiar with popular architectural styles: Italianate, Mansard and Queen Anne. Masonry buildings that survive, either partially or entirely, from this period include the first and second stories of the Hill Building at 38 Union Square (1874) and most importantly, the Eberle Block (1884) at 31-33 Somerville Avenue. These buildings provide a physical link with Somerville's transition from a town to an incorporated city in 1872. This visual transformation of Union Square, from a residential quarter to a commercial center, also occurred in Davis Square, at the more western end of the City, where the population increased six fold between 1870 and 1920, from 14,685 to 93,091!

The appearance of Union Square changed again during the period roughly from 1930 to 1980. Victorian era commercial blocks were destroyed or dramatically altered by the removal of the upper stories as tenants could not be found to rent the space with only walk up access. Minimal maintenance ultimately caused buildings to be destroyed by fire, as well as the wrecker's ball. Today those losses often appear as missing teeth in the streetscape, occupied by surface parking lots or unsightly plots. One of the most unfortunate changes to the skyline was the removal of the steeple on St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in 1978 because it was deemed to be structurally unsound.

Despite many mid-20th century changes, Union Square retains much of its unique architectural character through several 19th century buildings, including the Stone Building and the former fire station, or in glimpses of hidden treasures beneath, such as the St. Thomas Episcopal Church, or the modest mid-19th century houses in the Everett/Emerson Street area.

Union Square is well poised for yet another visual transformation, especially given the planned extension of the Green Line MBTA to the area. Careful consideration is needed to preserve and protect the key buildings that enhance the area's distinctive appearance and trace its evolution, including through adaptive reuse and additions to the structures. New buildings on sites bordering the center of Union Square can be designed wisely, drawing upon visual cues from surviving 19th century buildings, in terms of their fenestration, trim elements, form, siting, and materials. Becoming familiar with the architectural and historical significance of many of these buildings is an important step and is the underlying purpose of this walking tour.



The tour begins at the eastern edge of Union Square, near the intersection of Washington Street and Somerville Avenue, and starts in front of a very prominent building that awaits a new use.

Built in 1935, the **United States Post Office/Somerville Main Post Office** at **237 Washington Street** replaced a wood-framed Prospect Hill School House that has occupied this key intersection since at least the early 1850s. Architects Louis Adolph Simon and Maurice P. Mead provided the City of Somerville with an unusually fine example of a Colonial Revival post office building. Rising a single story from a granite block basement to a flat shingle-sheathed hip roof, its walls are laid up in Flemish bond brick with limestone trimmings.



Ross Embrose Moffett (1888–1971), a key figure in the Provincetown Art Colony in the early 20th century, painted the lobby mural above to depict a scene that recalled the patriotism of **James Miller**, who was killed during a skirmish with the British on their Retreat from Lexington on April 19 1775. He is reputed to have said to his sons that “I am too old to run but not to fight” as the British made their way around Prospect Hill toward Charlestown. The mural was made possible through funding from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) and has become a defining feature of the building. The Federal Government decided to cease the building’s operations as a post office in 2013, and it was sold to a private developer in 2014 for adaptive reuse.



important focal point within the Square and currently serves as the headquarters for SCATV.

Please note that to the right of the Post Office is the triangular parcel that has long been occupied by a fire station. Bordered by Washington Street and Somerville Avenue, an Engine House has been located on this site since the 1850s. The old fire house was demolished to accommodate the present **Fire Station** which was constructed in 1903–04. Walter T. Littlefield, the City’s Commissioner of Buildings, provided its Georgian design, with a tower originally capped by an octagonal roof and colonial weathervane. Although the station’s clock tower has since been reduced in height, the structure remains an

From the Post Office walk east toward a residence with a distinctive double-pitched or gambrel roof.



The William P. Walker House at 215 Washington Street is the most architecturally significant residence within the Union Square area by virtue of its prominent siting, notable architectural elements, and distinctive L-shaped gambrel-roofed volume. The second story and attic of the house date from the mid-1700s, making its gambrel roof appropriate to the period when this type of roof was popular (ca.1700–80), rather than an example of a mid-1800s revival of a Colonial roof type. A gambrel roof is highly

practical as it accommodates a more commodious attic space than a standard hip roof and also allows for little snow accumulation. A new first story was constructed in 1860 without demolishing the original. This type of house expansion was not uncommon in New England towns, but was more typically practiced in cases where the original buildings were elevated to allow the insertion of commercial storefronts under the original first stories. The person responsible for this alteration may have been George P. Walker, who was employed at the Warren Hotel that was once located in Union Square.

From the Walker House walk by the site of the recently demolished Samuel Holt House. Holt was a teamster and a Somerville alderman. Although the first floor of this late 1850s house had been significantly altered to accommodate a funeral home, enough of the cupola-topped Italianate form remained to envision the way it originally looked. Anchoring the corners of Merriam's intersection with Washington Street are two historic buildings of considerable interest.

MBTA Car Barn (1927), at **Washington and Merriam Streets** This modern looking structure is part of the former MBTA car barn built in 1927. It incorporates a portion of the Fire Department and serves as the headquarters for the Somerville's Police Dept. The original use is most evident within the bricked-in openings of the Merriam Street and Somerville Avenue sides of the car barn.

Hannah J. Allen Building (1890) at **210 Washington Street** Hannah J. Allen was born in Massachusetts in 1822. She married Channey Booth in 1848 and by 1850 they resided at McLean Asylum for the Insane that was once located in the Cobble Hill section of East Somerville. Mr. Booth was a physician at the Asylum until his death in 1860. Ten years later, Hannah married Benjamin Allen, a merchant from New Hampshire who invested in Somerville real estate. The Allens were wealthy enough to have an Irish servant girl board with them, and own other properties beside this one. This Queen Anne commercial/residential building was designed to house two stores and six residential units, apparently to take advantage of the electric trolley introduced to Somerville in 1890. This new form of transportation resulted in a great wave of building construction as nearly half of Somerville's housing stock was built between 1890 and 1910. The earliest known commercial tenants were Henry Freitag who operated a bakery, and the other storefront contained Decio Biondi's grocery store by 1924. Some long-time Somerville residents may still remember the Rossmore Cafe which occupied both storefronts during the 1940s.

*From Washington Street stroll southward along Merriam Street to Somerville Avenue. Here, see evidence of the City alive with new businesses started by young entrepreneurs. The **Bantam Cider Company** was established in 2013, with a mission to change the way people experience cider, plus play an active role in the community. Sprung from a family tradition of wine-making,*

the founders were inspired to create a product that was somehow special. The cider is produced using all local fruit and ingredients, and made right on the premises, at 40 Merriam Street.
www.bantamcider.com

Now look across the street at the turn of the century streetscape that has considerable design interest.

Although Somerville Avenue east of Union Square is largely characterized by altered mid-19th to early 20th century buildings, one sees here and there, intact, contiguous properties of considerable historic interest. Their surviving features attest to the area's turn-of-the twentieth century prosperity. One historic streetscape that deserves to be preserved for future generations is represented by **216 and 218/218B-222 Somerville Avenue.**

The tall and narrow masonry commercial/residential block at **216 Somerville Avenue** exhibits a main façade dominated by a broad, full-length three-story oriel bay. Composed of galvanized iron, this massive projection features the initials EJL 1896 on one of its ornamental panels. The L may stand for Lewellyn as a M. Lewellyn owned the building in 1900. By 1897, John Sweeney's Grocery Store was located on the ground floor, while a Mr. Sweeney, and William Hood, a watchman in East Cambridge, were renters living in the building's two residential units.



Next door at **218-218B Somerville Avenue** (1926) is a handsome two-story commercial block designed in the Colonial Revival style, complete with boldly rendered ribbon and swag ornamentation. The ground floor storefronts were occupied by Rafaele D. Vasta's fish store and Salvatore Ciano's grocery. Early occupants of this building include Rafaele Campostoso, meat cutter, Salvatore Nardella, meat worker, and Anthony Douglas, waiter. The property is clearly tied to the early Italian community in Union Square, with two tenants working for the meat packing industry that is long associated with the area.

From the corner of Somerville Avenue and Merriam Street, walk westward along Somerville Avenue toward Prospect Street.



224 Somerville Avenue (ca. 1933) was constructed during the early 1930s. The concrete and brick commercial structure has substantial aesthetic appeal despite being a utilitarian building. The concrete walls suggest formal rustication, while the stepped parapet has a Art Deco sensibility. The Barnes & Walsh Auto Body Repair Shop has been located in this building since at least 1940.

Thomas and Katherine O'Keefe House at **261 Somerville Avenue** (ca. 1890) is a modest

Italianate house built around 1890 for a blacksmith whose shop was once located next door. The house provides evidence that the Italianate style that came to the fore around 1850 was still used in the design of Somerville houses as late as 1890. The intact and ornate bracketed door hood and paired brackets at the eaves illustrates why the Italianate style is sometimes called the "bracketed style".

Union Square Garage at 267-271 Somerville Avenue (1914) is the earliest known and surviving auto-related building in the Union Square area. Measuring approximately 113 feet wide by 50 feet deep, the building occupies the entire lot. Two of the three center bays are still extant with ca.1960 overhead doors. The rhythmic repetition of segmental-arched bays at the second story strike an old fashioned, late 19th century note, while the 16 segmental arched windows underscore the horizontal massing of the building. The garage first appears in the City Directory in 1915 at 269 Somerville Avenue, along with 18 other automobile garages in Somerville.

From Somerville Avenue turn left onto Prospect Street. Cross Prospect Street to head west into an interesting pocket of mid-to-late 19th century residences that border Everett and Emerson Streets.

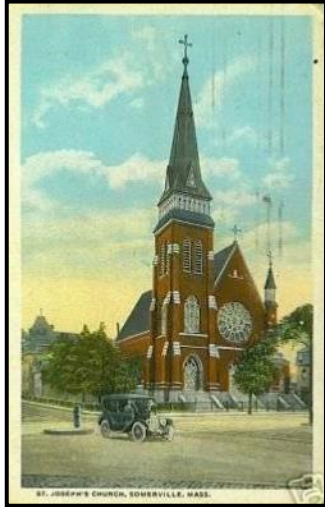
This triangular area is an unexpected oasis hemmed in by heavily traveled thoroughfares that lead into Union Square, including Webster Avenue on the west, Somerville Avenue on the north, and Prospect Street on the east. The Everett/Emerson Streets area encompasses at least four houses dating back to the 1850s, with the remaining half dozen or so harking back to the period of 1860 - 1890. Prior to the mid-1850s, this area was covered by wetlands associated with the Miller's River. Land-making activities were no doubt spurred on by the arrival of nearby industries such as Union Glass, and the newly created land enabled significant residential construction. By the early 1870s residents on Everett and Emerson Streets included an iron worker, painter, cabinet maker, engineer, barber, gas fitter, and three carpenters, including **Samuel Tuttle** who was the original owner of **14 Everett Street**. The Tuttle House history begins in September of 1856, when Mr. Tuttle paid Prospect Hill real estate developer Robert Vinal just over \$1000 for the lot and "the building there on." Tuttle himself may have been the carpenter responsible for building this charming Italianate, center-gable house.



Along Emerson Street up to its intersection with Everett Street are modest houses with isolated elements that nod to either the Greek Revival or Italianate styles. In one instance a front entrance is set off by sidelights and a rectangular transom (**2 Emerson Street**), while typically Italianate brackets and a center gable are in evidence at **3 Emerson Street**. By the early 1870s, residents of Emerson Street included the Nathaniel Dennet family at **3 Emerson Street** who was a foreman at the nearby Union Glass Company and the head of a family that included Alex H. Dennet, paper hanger, and Theodore D. Dennet, machinist at the Union Glass Company. Dennet's neighbors during the 1870s included East Cambridge barber Antonio E. Bram (**4 Emerson**

Street), James F. Guthrie, engineer (**6 Emerson Street**) and James E. O’Neil, bookkeeper at Bay State Glass Company (**8 Emerson Street**).

From Everett Street turn right onto Webster and then cross Washington Street to view St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church.



Damage to St. Joseph’s Church was caused by the hurricane of September 1938.

St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church (1870-1874) sits at the intersection of **Washington and Webster Streets**. Until this church became available for Roman Catholic services, Somerville’s 2,000 Catholics had no alternative except to walk considerable distances to churches in Charlestown and Cambridge. On January 20, 1870, the Mayo estate was purchased, and architect James Murphy designed a new church for local residents in the Victorian Gothic style. The first services were held in the lower church in 1871, with Monsignor Christopher C. McGrath serving as the church’s pastor. He retained that position for the next sixty-three years! The church suffered major roof damage during the Hurricane of 1938. In 1978, Union Square’s skyline lost a major landmark when the church’s steeple was taken down due to concern about its structural instability and potential to collapse. The church was locally designated as a single-building historic district in 2010.



Early 20th century postcard view of Somerville’s first Roman Catholic Church.

Now look northeastward to view the distinctive triangular form of the Stone Building.



On the north side of Union Square is the **Stone Building (Barristers Hall)** at **57–61 Union Square** (1891). It sits near the location of the pre-Revolutionary War Piper’s Tavern which served the busy Colonial crossroads now known as Union Square. The building is named in honor of the original owner, Jonathan Stone, a prominent carriage maker, and is constructed on part of his ancestral land. The Stone family settled in Somerville well before the American Revolution.

The structure originally contained four large stores on the first floor, one of which was occupied by the Somerville Savings Bank. Frederick Stone, Jonathan’s son, was the bank’s first treasurer and held the position for 43 years.

The Stone Building’s upper floors were built to accommodate an Odd Fellows organization which boasted a large reception room, a ladies’ parlor, a gentlemen’s smoking room, and a coatroom. The Odd Fellows also dined in a large, well-appointed banquet hall with a seating

capacity of 300. This much-altered structure of steel frame construction is faced with a brick curtain wall. This type of construction predates the first steel frame building in Boston, the Winthrop Building, at Washington and Water Streets, which was not built until three years later. Granite was used for the Stone Building's foundation and lintels, and most of the now-covered decorative details were originally concentrated on the first floor. On the east wall of the Stone Building is a colorful mural depicting George Washington reviewing his troops. This local landmark was created in 1994 by then local artist Be Allen Sargent.

*Located just to the east of this building is the **former Police Headquarters at 70 Union Square** (1932)*

Built to replace the first police headquarters on Bow Street (1874), the architect of this handsome Renaissance and Georgian Revival building is not known. The structure housed an expanding police force of 150 officers and a constabulary when it was completed in 1932. The City sold the building to a private developer in the 1980's to adaptively reuse it for offices and an eatery on the lower level. It was the original location for the Elephant Walk Restaurant, serving then unique French-Cambodian cuisine, that later moved to a Porter Square location.



Before heading southwest on Washington Street round the Washington Street/Somerville Avenue corner to view some remaining buildings constructed before and immediately after the Civil War.

Union Square, ca. early 1900s. Left to right: Masonic Building (demolished), Hill Building (partly intact) and Warren Hotel (demolished)

Hill Building, at **38 Union Square** (1874). Built in the High Victorian Gothic style in 1874 and altered by the removal of its upper two floors in 1935, the Hill Building exhibits ca. 1980 storefronts that still occupy the original 19th century bays. This business block was named for its first owner, Ira Hill, who was a major real estate magnate in eastern Somerville during the mid-19th century and who was responsible for platting Summit Avenue atop Prospect Hill. It is estimated that this New Hampshire native was responsible for the construction of over 300 buildings in Somerville! In 1875, tenants of the Hill Building included a grocer, a homeopathic physician, a publisher of the *Somerville Journal*, a real estate agent, and a surveyor. In addition, anti-alcohol or Temperance organizations rented space in this building. The property currently awaits an innovative development team that can fully restore, and perhaps add onto the upper stories of the once striking red brick, granite and brownstone-trimmed commercial structure.

From the corner of Washington Street and Somerville Avenue cross over to the north side of Union Square to consider three buildings bordering the south side of this crossroad.

Eberle Building at 31-34 Union Square(1884)

This three-story, brick commercial building is a very ornate and well-preserved structure that was named after Phillip Eberle, a shoe dealer. He lived next door at 34 Somerville Avenue in a house he built himself in the 1870s. Designed in the Queen Anne style, the storefronts are particularly noteworthy for their intact surrounds. The vintage surrounds of this building should be retained at all costs as one of Union Square’s most important architectural place-making designs. Eberle helped develop the Masonic Block (1869) which once stood next door to the west.



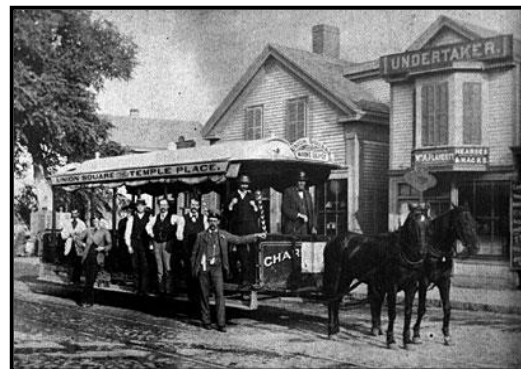
Union Building at 16 Union Square(1922)The classical detailing in this building can be seen in the pedimented entrance surround and pilaster-like panels between the second story windows.



Constructed by an unidentified architect in 1922, the commercial tenants on the ground floor through 1940, included a men's clothing store, a confectioner, an insurance company, and a lunch counter. The second story tenants included a lawyer, dentist, hairdresser and barber. Minor repairs were made to the building after a fire in 1942. During the 1950s, Goodwin's Furniture and Bernie's Record Shop were located in this building. The Union Building stands on the site of a

distinctive Greek Revival building called the Oasis that was clad with clapboards and a broad end gable facing the Square. It contained a store popular for local residents to socialize.

Union Square’s oldest extant building is the Mid-Nite convenience store at **15 Union Square**. Built circa 1845, this wooden Greek Revival building once had a side porch and an attic window with shutters. In October 1860, Queen Victoria’s son, later to be King Edward VII, rode through the Square, passing this building on his way back to Boston from a gala reception at Harvard College. This modest building was originally part of the real estate portfolio of Robert Aldersey Vinal, who was a Prospect Hill real estate magnate, a grain dealer, and a notable politician.



A horse-drawn streetcar ("horsecar") operated by the Middlesex Street Railway passes the ca. 1845 15 Union

*Returning to Washington Street, stroll southwestward to Hawkins Street, pass by the Second Empire **William H. Burt House** (1874) at **264 Washington Street**, which is noteworthy for its formal center pavilion that rises to a pyramidal mansard roof. Next Door is the former St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Parochial School at **268-272 Washington Street** that was built in 1890. In 1981, the Somerville Housing Authority converted it into 20 residential units.*

In contrast to the prominence of St. Joseph's Church in Union Square, the former **St. Thomas Episcopal Church** has been largely forgotten, hidden from view by a tight cluster of trees, houses, and commercial buildings. From the foot of the driveway of **269 Washington Street**, however, one can glimpse part of its south wall. St. Thomas was designed in the Gothic Revival style (1870-1875) by the construction firm of George Trefren & Son. Between 1907 and 1913 the side aisles and chancel originally planned for the building were added to the south end. The tower was taken down around 1930 and by then, the vestibule on the main Somerville Avenue façade had achieved its present full length. The church beginnings are rooted in St. John's Episcopal Church on Devens Street in Charlestown. The first pastor, George W. Durrell, presided over a congregation of just over 130 parishioners from 1870-1895. During the 1960s the congregation dissolved and since then the building has housed a nursery school, Haitian and Hispanic religious groups, and non-profit agencies.

Note the circa 1870 Victorian residences bordering Washington Street between the Sherman Café and Hawkins Street. Together with the church buildings across the street, these Victorian era residences provide a fine vintage streetscape at one of the key western entrances to Union Square.

269 Washington Street is a solid example of the Mansard style, while **273 Washington Street** is a well-preserved Italianate house configured with a side hall plan. It was originally owned by John Ashley, a Boston lamp fixtures dealer. The wood-frame double house at **277-275 Washington Street** was originally designed in a more Italianate style, but it acquired a third story and a more Federal Revival sensibility during the early 20th century. During the 1870s, John G. Smith, a superintendent at Metallic Art Works in East Cambridge, lived here.

The two-story red brick, flat roofed industrial building at **285 Washington Street**, corner of Hawkins Street, originally housed the **I.H. Brown Moulding Company**. The building dates back to the late 1880s and is typical of the carpentry and woodworking concerns that rose to the fore during the boom years of Cambridge and Somerville's expansion. The Brown Co. moved here in 1886 after a fire destroyed their headquarters in Cambridge. The company specialized in mouldings of all descriptions, in addition to window frames, sashes, drawer cases, and the like. One of the company's specialties was wooden exhibition cases for museums, including Harvard University's Agassiz Museum of Natural History. By 1928, its first floor was used for sawing and planing, the second floor for cabinet work, and the basement for planing and storage. The building currently houses Burma Designs, the Fringe Artist Design Cooperative, and Moroccan Caravan, while Metro Pedal Power rents space in the basement.

Hawkins Street was named for Guy C. Hawkins who along with 151 others drew up and signed a petition on November 22 1841 calling for Somerville's independence from Charlestown. Hawkins and his neighbors had become impatient with local government's ability to meet the needs of its citizens living in "the land beyond the Neck". As early as 1828, a petition had been presented to the state legislature calling for western Charlestown to be incorporated as the

independent town of Warren. The petition was withdrawn, but fourteen years later the independence movement was successful when a bill incorporating a new town was signed by Governor John Davis on March 3, 1842. The original choice for the new town's name was Walford after Charlestown's first English settler Thomas Walford. According to a report commission by the Somerville Historical Society, however, the name of Somerville was ultimately chosen "for purely fanciful reasons."

From Hawkins Street and Somerville Avenue walk west to Gerrior Square. Named for two brothers who died in World War I, this crossroads is still surrounded by architecturally significant buildings. The square memorably marks the western gateway to historic Union Square.



Dominating the intersection of Somerville Avenue and Bow Street is the massive **Drouet Block** at **58-68 Bow Street**, otherwise known as the *Condominiums at Gerrior Square*. Built in 1898, the Drouet Block is the largest of three wooden commercial blocks all standing in close proximity to each other at the western edge of Union Square. All three of the blocks, the Richmond, Bennett and Drouet, are characterized by multiple original and intact storefronts, ornate

window trim, and undulating wall surfaces. The Drouet and Richmond blocks were designed by architect Aaron Gould who also may have inspired the facade of the Bennett Block. Gould was born in 1865 in Nova Scotia where he learned the carpentry trade. His later career brought him to Maine and to the southern states where he built hotels. Union Square is quite fortunate to retain two, possibly three, of his substantial and highly ornamented wood-frame buildings.

The lot housing the **Bennett Block** was originally carved from the old Hawkins estate. The building was initially constructed for William F. Bennett, whose heating and plumbing business was located at what is now 7 Carlton Street. During the early 20th century the upper floors were occupied by Irish and Italian families, employed in the shoe and tube factories, as well as carpenters, clerks and lab workers. Amazingly, the original late Victorian molding that surrounds the display windows remains intact. The upper stories of the Bennett Block retain both the original bowed windows and the polygonal oriel ones. The oriels are unusual in that they are crowned by free-standing pediments, adding considerable interest to the roof line.



The Bennet Block (early 1890s) at Somerville Avenue & Carlton Street

*From the Bennett Block, look east along Somerville Avenue to notice the rectangular brick building at **374 Somerville Avenue**, an early 20th century theatre.*

Constructed in 1908, **374 Somerville Avenue** has been extensively altered since its heyday as the **Star Theatre**. It is currently obscured by a mesh metal screen, often applied during the 1950s and 1960s to modernize buildings. The Star Theatre is reported to be the second purposely built movie theatre in the nation. Unlike numerous pre-1930 theatres originally designed to showcase vaudeville acts, the Star was built to show silent movies. It was one of fourteen theatres located in Somerville during the first half of the 20th century. The Somerville Theatre, located in Davis Square, is the only one still operating in the City as a movie theatre. By 1908, the primary audience for the “silents” shown at the Star was a growing population of Italian and Greek immigrants that resided in Ward II. The building is currently occupied by a business on the first floor that focuses on specialty coffee and training skilled servers and two architectural offices upstairs; with no remaining evidence of the Star's Lobby or auditorium.

Last but not least, on the northwest side of Gerrior Square is a small masonry structure that provides a physical link to Somerville's Automobile Age in the first quarter of the 20th century.

Cities Service Refining Co. Fuel Station at 69-71 Bow Street (ca.1925)

This diminutive brick Colonial Revival-style structure was built during the mid-1920s. Its white washed walls rest on a concrete foundation capped by a slate hip roof, with a square cupola atop the center. This station is another example of a wave of automobile-related buildings constructed in the Union Square area during the early 20th century. During the late 1920s the number of filling stations jumped from four in 1927 to fourteen by 1929. Oil entrepreneur Henry Latham Doherty established the Cities Service Company in 1910 as a supplier to public utilities that soon entered the oil refining business (Citgo Company History). By 1933, a small node of automobile-related commercial concerns had joined this tiny filling station which by that time rubbed elbows with a large auto repair shop and a ten-stall garage at the rear. No longer in evidence are two gas tanks that once stood in front of the building.



From Gerrior Square round the corner to Bow Street and walk northeast toward the former Police Station.

The former **Union Square Police Station at 50 Bow Street** was built in 1874 from designs provided by George A. Clough, the first in-house architect for the City of Boston. Clough designed numerous fire stations, police stations, and other municipal buildings in Boston neighborhoods during the 1870s. This well-known architect provided Somerville with a stately Mansard style police station during the City's infancy as an incorporated municipality (1871). This building also represents an adaptive reuse and preservation success story for the City of Somerville. The original Mansard roof and parapet, reputed to have been destroyed in a 1940s fire, was recreated through a public-private partnership that began in 2000. The extensive rehabilitation and restoration work resulted in a fourteen-unit condominium development that was completed in 2005.

Crescent Row at 39-49 Bow Street represents a rare example of Federal Revival style row housing built circa 1900. Instead of imitating the fancy row houses of Charles Bulfinch (1769-1844), these houses celebrate the simple charm of plain attached dwellings built for working-class families during the early 1800s. This set of unique row houses serves as a strong visual anchor for this highly visible intersection.

Next door to the former police station is the **E.C. Mann House at 46 Bow Street**. This late 19th century house is a key component in the remarkable node of primarily Victorian buildings that border the intersection of Bow and Summer Streets. The Mann House sits at the westernmost edge of the Bow Street residences known collectively as “Doctors’ Row.” The facades of the Mann House are unusually ornate, complete with all manner of turned elements, windows of various shapes and sizes, and a picturesque roof line enlivened with copper finials. Particularly noteworthy are the extremely narrow columns at the front porch and the high quality stained glass windows. This highly eclectic and colorfully painted house would be very much at home in the “painted lady” neighborhoods of San Francisco.

Cross Bow Street, to stand on the small triangular traffic island at the intersection of Bow and Summer Streets to view an impressive 360 degree panorama of buildings, each possessing their own distinctive historic design.

Construction of the **First United Methodist Church at 1 Summer Street** (1858-1874) began on the eve of the Civil War and then, inexplicably, took sixteen years to complete! However, the outcome is a handsome Victorian Gothic house of worship, faced with red brick and rock, and trimmed with granite. The 90-foot polychrome slate steeple that originally completed the east tower of the façade was removed after the extraordinarily destructive hurricane of 1938. The building was converted from 2003-2007 into a seven-unit condominium development, with some enjoying expansive ceiling heights up to 65 feet.

The Richmond at 33-37 Bow Street is a mixed-use, commercial/ residential building built in 1892. As one of three substantial wood-frame buildings in the western section of Union Square, the Richmond was also designed by the eminent architect Aaron Gould. The Queen Anne style of this building is noteworthy for its towered massing, polygonal oriels, and the sleeping porches nestled within the Wesley Park building façade.

The **Prospect Hill Congregational Church at 17 Bow Street** was founded by Somerville dairyman H.P. Hood and other local businessmen in 1887 and epitomizes the Richardsonian Romanesque style. The architect was Henry Squarebridge McKay who ranked among the most talented imitators of the work of H. H. Richardson. Like Richardson’s Trinity Church at Copley Square, the 1880s Somerville church relies on the use of polychromatic light-hued granite and brownstone trim for maximum visual effect. Converted to residential use in the late 1980s, some of the condominium owners enjoy spaces illuminated by spectacular stained glass windows, exposed beams, and very high ceilings.

The Somerville National Bank at 11-15 Bow Street was completed in 1908 from designs provided by the architectural firm of Gay and Proctor. Despite alterations that were made to accommodate later uses, enough original form and Neo-Classical Revival elements remain to convey an image of conservatism, authority, and time-tested financial wisdom, which banks to this day still like to project. This former financial institution was founded in 1892 at another

Union Square location by the locally prominent Stone family who were active in local politics and business associations. This bank had the distinction of being the only bank in Somerville that was a member of the Federal Reserve in Boston. In 1942, the rear wall was demolished and the York Safe Company designed a new structural component to accommodate offices and a steel vault with a steel door of 12” depth. The current owners converted the building to a café in 2007 and creatively incorporated the rear vault within it, offering patrons a long table and seating to enjoy more quiet or private space for working, eating, or playing board games.

This brochure was produced by the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission, in concert with Edward Gordon, historian and tour leader, as part of the 2015 ArtsUnion Grant Program. Managed by the Somerville Arts Council, ArtsUnion works in collaboration with numerous local organizations, artists, businesses, and community members to spark community-wide excitement about Union Square, and create new economic opportunities for local artists. ArtsUnion is funded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and its John and Abigail Adams Art Program.

Established in 1985, the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) administers the City’s many historic districts, advises homeowners, provides historic and technical information, and is an arm of City government. The Commission also sponsors events and develops programs and written materials as part of its public outreach and educational mission. Its Staff can be reached via 617-625-6600, extension 2500 or www.somervillema.gov/historicpreservation.