

So Fine a Prospect: A Walking Tour of Prospect Hill & Union Square, Somerville MA

Prepared by

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The seven hills of Somerville are its greatest natural glory and its defining topographical characteristic. Indeed, many important aspects of the city's history have unfolded on the city's hilltops.

The first part of the tour will explore the summit and southwestern slopes of the glacial drumlin called Prospect Hill, which, at 215 feet, is the city's highest eminence. The second part of the tour will focus on the still-vital urban crossroads known as Union Square, at the southwestern base of Prospect Hill. The Prospect Hill area is bounded by School Street on the west, Somerville Avenue and Washington Street on the south and McGrath, and O'Brien Highway / Medford Street at the north and east. As we shall see, Prospect Hill holds a special place within the story of the early days of the American Revolution. Later, during the mid-1800s, well-to-do families, such as the Munroes, Hills, Vinals and others were drawn to the Hill's panoramic views, access to fresh air, as well as its proximity to commuter railroad transportation at the bottom of the Hill in Union Square. During the course of our stroll we will seek out Prospect's Hill's unusual abundance of interesting, well-crafted architectural elements, including: columned porches, gingerbread ornamentation as well as some of the loveliest stained glass in the Boston area.

1. If you think the **Somerville Public Library at 79 Highland Avenue** looks like a not-so-distant-cousin of the Boston Public Library at Copley Square, you would be absolutely right. Early in his career, Edward Lippincott Tilton (1861-1933), the architect of the Somerville's Library (1914), worked for the firm who designed the BPL in 1888-1896: Mc Kim Mead and White. Both the Boston and Somerville libraries were designed to look like over-sized Renaissance palaces. Interestingly, Somerville's library was one of hundreds of America libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie, the famous Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based steel magnate. As a poor boy of high intelligence growing up in Scotland, Carnegie was invited to study in the private library of a wealthy family. Towards the end of his life, Carnegie credited his legendary success in business to his early access to books.

2. Built in 1892, **The Highland Apartments at 66 Highland Avenue** provide a fine introduction to the architectural treasures of Prospect Hill. This orange brick and brownstone trimmed building along with its distinctive weather vane-topped corner tower gives its immediate area a strong sense of place. The Highland's architect, Samuel D. Kelley, designed many handsome town houses and apartment buildings in the Back Bay and at Audubon Circle. For some, the idea of more than one family living under the same roof, albeit in separate units, was considered too Bohemian or at worst, immoral. Around 1900, apartment living became more accepted by polite society. By that time, as Cleveland Amory notes in the *Proper Bostonians*, Boston's upscale apartment buildings had become "home to the newly wed and the nearly dead."

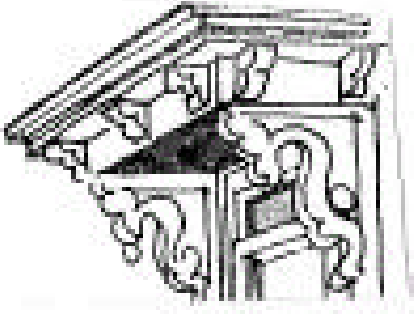
3. Noteworthy for its restless, highly sculptural form, the Queen Anne house at **54 Vinal Avenue** was built ca.1895. Walter H. Wright, an early owner, was a tin can manufacturer in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown. **49 Vinal Avenue** was built in 1894 by Somerville realtor, Frederick

Haley. This highly eclectic residence ranks among the most lushly ornamented residences in Somerville. The front porch exhibits beautiful fluted Corinthian columns. See if you can find the repeated ornament that originated in ancient Greece. Designed to resemble the leaves of a palm tree, this motif is called a palmette or anthemion. In addition, this house possesses unusually sophisticated stained glass panels.



Anthemion motif

4. The Italianate mansard cottages at **45 and 47 Vinal Avenue** were built ca. 1875 by "maiden lady" and real estate developer, Lizzie Wellington. Both houses are enclosed by mansard roofs, called "modern French roofs" in the mid-1800s. Mansards originated in late 1600s France and were widely used for houses along Paris' boulevards during the 1850s and 1860s. **47 Vinal Avenue** exhibits noteworthy raised saw-cut gingerbread ornamentation.



Bracketed Italianate door hood

Across the street from these charming cottages is the compact Shingle Style house at **42 Vinal Avenue**. One of the sources of inspiration for the Shingle Style was old Colonial era salt box houses with sweeping roof slopes similar to that of **42 Vinal Avenue**. When such houses were built back in the 1600s, this roof contour gave them a profile resembling the boxes that held salt then in use in the British colonies in America, giving rise to this term. This house was built in 1884 for an A. P. Hammond. Ten years later, J. Sumner Watson, a salesman, was the owner of this house.

5. Set out as a cul-de-sac extending westward from Walnut Street, Summit Avenue reached Vinal Avenue after 1884. Built ca. 1886, **26 Summit Avenue** represents a mature example of the Queen Anne style. Typical of this style is the use of different materials with contrasting surface textures at the first and upper stories. In this case, the first story is constructed of red brick while the rest of the house is sheathed with wood shingles. The half-timbering at the main facade's gable and dormers purposely recalls houses built in Medieval England. One of its early owners was John E. Sylvester, a prominent iron master from Hanover, Massachusetts. In 1864, Sylvester purchased a spike and nail factory on Franklin Street in East Somerville formerly called Bartlett and Page.

6. Vying for our attention at the intersection of Walnut Street, Summit Avenue and Boston Street, is a cluster of architecturally distinguished houses. This quartet represents three distinct stages in the development of Prospect Hill. Included are the ca.1850 Greek Revival residence of realtor Ira Hill at **91 Walnut Street** (verandah and bay added during the 1890s) and the palatial, towered Queen Anne residence of provisions dealer Louisville Niles at **45 Walnut Street**. Across from the Niles house is the ca.1870 Italianate mansard residence of businessman George Simpson at **48 Walnut Street**. At the northwest corner of Walnut and Summit is the enormous Queen Anne double house numbered **3 Summit Avenue**. Built for George Hill and his son in 1888, each unit contained twelve rooms and reception hall with bath and laundry.

7. Continuing eastward on **Boston Street**, we'll see the 1890s Queen Anne residence at number **83** built for Frank Marden, "wholesale oils" salesman, the early 1900s Colonial Revival / Craftsman style house at number **78** (once home to Kelleys and Hoods of Hood Milk fame) and the altered, yet still interesting ca. 1845 Greek Revival house built for John Dugan at numbers **71-73**. The expanse of Dugan's east yard prevented Hamlet Street from reaching Boston Street until after 1900. At the intersection of Boston and Greenville Streets, pause to look north down the hill at the clapboard-clad Italianate **19 Greenville Street** that was purchased from John Dugan in 1859 by house painter Joseph Q. Twombly.

8. Crowning the top of Prospect Hill is a granite structure that looks like a toy castle. On close inspection, the "castle" on **Munroe Street opposite Greenville Street** is the **Prospect Hill Park and Memorial Observatory**. Designed in the Gothic Revival style by Ernest Bailey and dedicated in 1903, this memorial is a tribute to the historic place Prospect Hill holds in the beginnings of the Revolution and the Civil War. Who would believe that the present peaceful hilltop neighborhood once served as a platform from which the colonists monitored British troop movements. Here,



General George Washington's troops withstood attacks from Red Coats stationed in British occupied Boston (1775-1776). Here too, early symbols of America, in the form of flags, were flown as evidence of the colonists resolve to win their struggle for independence. Indeed, Prospect Hill's great, yet largely unsung claim to fame is as the place where the first "American" flag of the thirteen colonies, also known as the "Grand Union Flag" was unfurled for first the time on American soil, January 1, 1776. The event is proudly reenacted by the city of Somerville every year. In 1777-1778 a British prisoner of war camp was located on Prospect Hill. During the Civil War, Prospect Hill was once again used as place for soldiers to set up camp.



9. Proceeding to Union Square via Walnut, Aldersey and Vinal, walk past the Greek Revival houses of Boston grain dealers Robert Munroe (**37 Walnut Street**, ca. late 1840s) and John Quincy Vinal (**9 – 11 Aldersey Street**, ca. 1850). Both Munroe, J.Q. Vinal and Vinal's brother, Robert Jr., were the first investors to comprehensively develop the southwestern slopes of Prospect Hill during the mid nineteenth century. Walking west on Aldersey turn left onto Vinal Avenue and continue onto Summer Street.

Union Square was initially called "Sand Pit Square" because its sandy, clay pit-dotted areas yielded a fine grade of silica used in glass and brick-making. Union Square became a major commercial center due to its location at an important crossroads in eastern Somerville. The Square's three major thoroughfares, Washington Street, Bow Street and Somerville Avenue (formerly Charlestown Lane and Milk Row) originated as seventeenth and eighteenth century trade routes. Middlesex County farm products were hauled through the Square on their way to be sold at markets in Charlestown and Boston. The introduction of the first railroad lines near the Square during the 1830s and 1840s encouraged the residential and commercial growth of the area.



The mid nineteenth century witnessed the rise of industries 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 would be an important focus for the commercial aspect of Somerville well into the twentieth century. Union Square hosted a major recruitment center during the Civil War and became known as "Liberty Pole Square" after a flagpole was erected by Somerville firemen in 1853. Today, Union Square is a lively melting pot of the City with residents of Azorean, Brazilian, Irish, Vietnamese and African heritage. It is not uncommon to hear a variety of languages spoken--including Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Thai and Hindi, and of course "American."

10. Well before the Revolution the path of **Bow Street** was diverted northward in a broad arc to avoid a marshy area related to Willis Creek, later known as Miller's River. Located at **1 Summer Street**, the **First United Methodist Church's** (1858-1874) construction began on the eve of the Civil War and then, inexplicably, took sixteen years to complete. The outcome, however, is a handsome red brick and rock-faced, granite trimmed, Victorian Gothic house of worship. The 90-foot polychrome slate steeple, which originally completed the east tower of the façade, was removed after the hugely destructive hurricane of 1938. Today, private developers are in the process of converting the former church to condominiums with expansive ceiling heights up to 65 feet!

11. **Crescent Row** at **39-49 Bow Street** (1900) represents a rare example of Federal Revival row housing. Instead of imitating the fancy row houses of Charles Bulfinch (1769-1844) these houses celebrate the simple charms of plain,

attached dwellings built for working class families during the early 1800s. Much of the visual interest of the Bow and Summer Streets' intersection is dependent on the unique character of this curved row.

12. If awards were given for the quirkiest, most self-consciously picturesque Victorian house in Somerville, certainly the ca.1868 E. C. Mann House at **46 Bow Street** would be a likely candidate for first place! The restless, complicated form of this clapboard-clad house, replete with lush and unusual ornamentation, would be at home in the San Francisco bay area.

13. The city's first Police Station at **50 Bow Street** (1874) was designed in the Victorian Gothic style by George H. Clough, a well-known Boston architect. During the 1870s, he designed many new schools, firehouses and police stations for Boston when it was busy annexing communities like Brighton, Charlestown, and West Roxbury. The City recently sold the building to a private developer who is rebuilding its original mansard roof lost to fire in the 1940s.

14. Founded by Somerville dairyman H.P. Hood and other local businessmen in 1887, the **Prospect Hill Congregational Church** at **17 Bow Street** epitomizes the Richardsonian Romanesque style. This church's 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, several condominium owners enjoy spaces illuminated by spectacular stained glass windows.



Romanesque capital

15 & 16. The **Hill Building** (1874) at **38 Union Square** is a high profile building at the intersection of Bow Street and Somerville Avenue. It currently awaits an innovative development team to restore the upper stories of the once striking High Victorian Gothic red brick, granite and brownstone-trimmed commercial block. The Queen Anne **Eberle Building** at **31-34 Somerville Avenue** could serve as a vintage model for preservationists

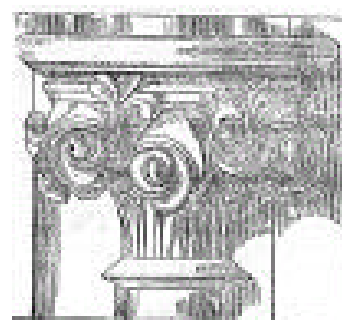


Egg and dart cornice molding

and designers interested in reproducing the intact Victorian surrounds of the display windows. The building was named for shoe dealer Phillip Eberle who built the Masonic Block (1869), the Square's first major commercial block that once stood to the east of the Eberle Building.

17. Union Square's oldest extant building is the Mid-Nite convenience store at **215 Washington Street** Built ca. 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.

18. Just to the west is **St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church**, at **Washington and Webster streets**. Until St. Joseph's (1870-1874) became available for Roman Catholic services, Somerville's 2,000 Catholics had 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 for the next sixty-three years! Union Square lost a major landmark when the steeple of the church was taken down in 1978 for fear that structural instability would cause it to collapse.



Gothic Capital

Bibliography: Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville; City Directories, 1874, 1884, 1895 and 1900 Hopkins & Bromley Maps; Somerville Board of Trade 1912; Field Guide to American Houses by V. & L. McAllister; Massachusetts Historical Commission Survey Forms; Your House in Medford by C. Howard