

From the Summit to the Square: A Walking Tour of Prospect Hill & Union Square Somerville, Massachusetts

Researched by *Edward W. Gordon*, President of the Victorian Society in America, New England Chapter, in 2007 for the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission.

The seven hills of Somerville are its most defining topographical characteristic on which much of the City's vibrant history has unfolded.

Our tour will first explore the summit and southwestern slopes of the glacial drumlin called Prospect Hill, which at 108 feet, is the City's highest eminence. The focus will then shift to the still vital crossroads of Union Square center, at the base of the Hill. An important site in the early days of the American Revolution, Prospect Hill, during the mid-1800s, attracted well-to-do families, such as the Munroes, Hills, and Vinals, due to its panoramic views, access to fresh air, and proximity to commuter railroad transportation in Union Square. This tour will showcase Prospect Hill's unusual abundance of interesting, well-crafted architectural elements, including columned porches, gingerbread ornamentation, and some of the loveliest stained glass in the Boston area.



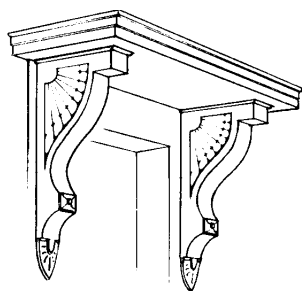
The Somerville Central Library (1914) at **79 Highland Avenue** was built by Edward Lippincott Tilton to look like an oversized Renaissance Palace. During his early years, Tilton worked for the firm McKim, Mead, and White that also built the Boston Public Library (1888-1896) in Copley Square. Its construction was funded by Andrew Carnegie, the famous Pittsburgh steel magnate who, as a poor boy growing up in Scotland was given access to the private library of a wealthy family. Later in life, Carnegie credited his legendary success to this early access to books, and he initiated his "Greek Temples of Learning" campaign to build libraries all across America.

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, with its distinctive weather-vane-topped corner tower, gives the 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 in Boston. For some at this time, 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."

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, exhibiting beautiful fluted Corinthian columns on the front porch, a lovely example of anthemion ornamentation, and unusually sophisticated stained glass panels.



The Italianate mansard cottages at **45 and 47 Vinal Avenue** were built ca. 1875 by real estate developer, Lizzie Wellington. Both houses are enclosed by mansard roofs, a style that originated in late 1600s France and was popularized along the boulevards of Paris during the 1850's and 60's before making its way to the States. Also note the raised saw-cut gingerbread ornamentation on 47 Vinal Avenue, a house that is winning a 2007 Preservation Award from the SHPC.



Look across the street at the compact Shingle Style house at **42 Vinal Avenue**. One source of inspiration for the Shingle Style was the old Colonial era Salt Box house, with its sweeping roof slopes as seen here. The name is a visual reference to the Colonial era form of containers for common table salt with slanting roof contours, similar to this house. Built in 1884 for an A. P. Hammond, it was then owned ten years later by J. Sumner Watson, a salesman.

23 Pleasant Avenue (1893) is a well-detailed example of a Queen Anne House built by the prolific contractor Henry W. P. Colson who was also an insurance and real estate agent. Like 49 Vinal next door, Frederick Haley owned this house in the 1890s.

15 Pleasant Avenue is one of the best-preserved examples of the Stick Style in Somerville, built circa 1884 by carpenter Elijah Walker. **12 Pleasant Avenue**, a robust example of the French Second Empire built in 1873 by and for Susan & Elijah Walker. **11 Pleasant Avenue**, built between 1884 and 1890, was the home of a local market employee, Jesse S Newcomb, who lived here during the 1890s.

4-6 Pleasant Avenue, 58-60 Walnut Street – the Hollander Blocks, were built during the mid-1890s for investor T Clarence Hollander. Note the appropriate paint colors.

At the intersection of Walnut Street, Summit Avenue, and Boston Street, is a cluster of architecturally distinguished houses that represents three distinct stages in the development of Prospect Hill. First built ca. 1850 is the Greek Revival residence of realtor Ira Hill at **91 Boston Street** (with a verandah and bay added during the 1890s), as well as the palatial, towered Queen Anne residence of provisions dealer Louisville Niles at **45 Walnut Street**. Then across from this, built ca. 1870, is the Italianate mansard residence of businessman George Simpson at **48 Walnut Street**. Now look toward the northwest corner of Walnut and Summit to see the enormous Queen Anne double house at **3 Summit Avenue** that was constructed in 1888 for George Hill and his son. Amazingly each unit contained twelve rooms, and a reception hall with bath and laundry!

Continuing eastward to **83 Boston Street** is the 1890s Queen Anne residence built for Frank Marden, a "wholesale oils" salesman. Across the street is the early 1900s Colonial Revival/Craftsman Style house at **78 Boston Street**, once home to the Kelleys and Hoods of Hood Milk fame. Also, see the altered, yet still interesting Greek Revival house built for John Dugan at **71-73 Boston Street**.

2 Bigelow Street is a well-preserved example of the Stick Style/Queen Anne Style that was built in 1886 for Boston Paint Dealer Henry A. Robbins.

The important contractor Ivory Bean, who was responsible for the construction of the St. Botolph's Street neighborhood in Boston in the 1890s, built **10 Bigelow Street** in 1887. It possesses one of the finest encircling verandas in the City.



Crowning the top of the hill on Munroe 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 beginnings of the Revolution and Union efforts of the Civil War. Who would believe that this present day peaceful hilltop neighborhood once served as the most formidable citadel in the Colonist lines during the Siege of Boston from June 17, 1775 to March 17, 1776? Here, General George Washington's Continental Army watched with jubilation the evacuation of the British from Boston and the harbor on March 17, 1776. Prospect Hill's great, yet largely unsung claim to fame, is as the place where the new flag of the thirteen colonies, also known as the "Grand Union Flag," was unfurled in defiance of the British for the first time, on January 1, 1776. Then in 1777-1778 Prospect Hill was the site of a British prisoner of war camp, while during the Civil War, it was a place for Union soldiers to set up camp. Be sure to return here on the 1st of January to celebrate the City's proud and annual re-enactment of the nation's first flag-raising.



85 Munroe Street – the Grandview. Samuel Kelley designed this early apartment building on the ridge of Prospect Hill. The original owner was Elbridge Park, co-owner of the famous Durgin Park Restaurant.

88 Munroe Street - built in two stages during the 1850s and 1880s, this was constructed for Benjamin S. and Hannah Munroe. Benjamin was the son of prosperous grain Dealer Robert Munroe, who with the Robert Aldersey and Ira Hill began to subdivide Prospect Hill for residential house lots beginning around 1850.

Proceeding to Union Square via Walnut Street to Columbus Avenue, walk past the Greek Revival houses of Boston grain dealers Robert Munroe (**37 Walnut Street**, ca. late 1840s) and see the house of John Quincy Vinal (**9-11 Aldersey Street**, ca. 1850). 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.

From Walnut Street, walk east on Columbus Avenue.

This double center gable Italianate house at **75-77 Columbus Avenue** was built circa 1884 on land owned by Martha and Richard I Sturtevant, a Union Square provisions (grocery) dealer.



63 Columbus Avenue is a substantial towered Second Empire residence built by local merchant S.C. Brackett in 1898.

61 Columbus Avenue is a good example of a pattern book mansard cottage built in 1883 for James H Brooks, a Union Square dry goods dealer. Note the rope molding that can be seen on several of the Mansards in the Prospect Hill Neighborhood. This house stands on one of the best lots in the Ira Hill subdivision.

27 Warren Avenue is representative of a house built by Thomas B. Blaikie, a local carpenter who was active in the Somerville Building Trades during the second half of the 19th century. The original owner was William H. Wilson of Onslow County, NS, but he never lived here. The first occupant of the house was High School Principal George L Baxter.

This house, along with its substantial stable at **30 Warren Avenue**, speaks to the prosperity of its original owner, Alvin L Lovejoy, who was a Union Square fancy goods dealer. This house also retains its rope molding.



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 units in the late 1980s, several owners enjoy spaces illuminated by spectacular stained glass windows.

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 to be sold at markets in Charlestown and Boston. The introduction of the first railroad lines near the Square during the 1830s and 1840s further spurred the residential and commercial growth that occurred in the area.



The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the rise of industries in Prospect Hill, 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

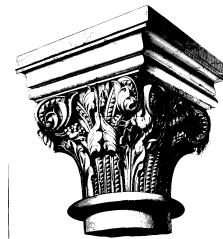
commercial success of Somerville well into the twentieth century. The Square served as a major recruitment center during the Civil War and became known as "Liberty Pole Square" after Somerville firemen erected a flagpole in 1853. Today, Union Square is a lively melting pot of the City, brimming with residents of Azorean, Brazilian, Irish, Vietnamese and African heritage.

Well before the American 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. Construction of the **First United Methodist Church** (1858-1874) at **1 Summer Street** 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 that originally completed the east tower of the façade was removed after the hugely destructive hurricane of 1938. The building was recently converted into 7 residential condominiums with expansive ceiling heights up to 65 feet!

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 charm of plain, attached dwellings built for working class families during the early 1800s. This set of unique row houses sits as a visual anchor of this amazing intersection.

The clapboard-clad E. C. Mann House at **46 Bow Street** with its restless, complicated form, and replete with lush and unusual ornamentation, would be at home in the San Francisco Bay Area. This house built ca. 1868 remains one of the quirkiest and most picturesque Victorian houses in Somerville.

Well-known Boston architect, George H. Clough, designed the City's first Police Station at **50 Bow Street** in 1874 in the Victorian Gothic style. During the 1870s, he also designed many new schools, firehouses, and police stations for Boston and surrounds. The City sold the building in 2005 to a private developer who has rebuilt its original mansard roof lost to fire in the 1940s, and restored and converted the handsome structure to 14 condominium units, winning them a Preservation Award from the SHPC in 2006.



Bibliography: Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville, MA (revised 1990) by Carole Zellie; City of Somerville Directories; 1874, 1884, 1895 and 1900 Hopkins & Bromley maps; Somerville Board of Trade, 1912; Field Guide to American Houses by V. & L. McAllester; Form B surveys of the Massachusetts Historical Commission; and Your House in Medford by Cynthia Howard, for the Medford Historical Commission.

The Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC), as part of the ArtsUnion Grant Project of the Somerville Arts Council, produced this brochure.

Established in 1985, the Historic Preservation Commission administers 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 ext. 2500 or www.ci.somerville.ma.us/historicpreservation

ArtsUnion is a project designed to boost the cultural economic development of Union Square, Somerville. The project is shepherded by the Somerville Arts Council, working in collaboration with numerous local organizations, artists, businesses and community members. The Project is expected to spark community-wide excitement about the Square, as well as create new economic opportunities for local artists. During 2007 ArtsUnion will present a series of cultural events/performances; run a craft market; create cultural tours; commission local artisans to design new streetscape furniture; and support a zoning/regulation review to further enhance the arts and distinct character of the Square. Over time the project is expected to strengthen the regional identity and long-term appeal of Union Square. ArtsUnion is funded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and its John and Abigail Adams Arts Program.

Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone

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www.ci.somerville.ma.us