

Looking Back & Going Forward

A Walking Tour of East Somerville



Led by Edward Gordon, President of the Victorian Society in America, New England Chapter – Sunday, May 18, 2008

During the mid-to-late 1800s, East Somerville was one of the most densely settled parts of the City. The 1852 Map of Somerville provides a very clear picture of how the neighborhood developed. A few streets, such as Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Vernon, and Perkins, were set out near Somerville's border with Charlestown. One major asset of this neighborhood was its topography – the level terrain of the area between Broadway and Pearl Street was perfect for house building. Beyond Pearl Street, to the south, the land dropped off

dramatically in the direction of Washington Street. East Somerville had fine soil for drainage, as well as clay for brick and pottery making. Industry was located on the edges of the area. For example, brewing, varnish-making, and manufacture of rubber products were found to the north in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown, whereas brick making, spike manufacturing, and potteries were located to the south, along and near Washington Street.

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

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



Beginning by going westward along Broadway and then doubling back to Franklin Street, the tour considers the commercial and municipal buildings directly on Broadway. As you can readily see Broadway is a major thoroughfare that serves as the gateway to Somerville as one comes from Charlestown and the City of Boston. The story of commerce along this street begins around the time that the horse drawn trolley was introduced in the 1850s. Long before this--in fact going back as far as the 1600s-- Broadway was an important highway. Indeed, it figured as part of the infamous "Midnight Ride" that Paul Revere took on horseback to reach Lexington and Concord on April 18, 1775. Although the route of the Middlesex Canal was completed in 1803 and extended through East Somerville--several blocks north of Broadway-- it triggered little development in the area. One noteworthy

exception was the node of buildings, including a tavern, in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown, which was the southern terminus of the canal.

An observant walker will notice the ghosts of previous businesses in the changes at the entries and the painted signs on brick walls. Some of the more recent anecdotal information in italics highlights below the changes in living memory, contrasting what existed a century ago with what we see now. Some businesses served the Irish community, others the Italians, or Portuguese. Many of these families still live in the area while new Brazilian, Salvadoran and Haitians have also added to the flavors of East Somerville



8 Broadway was known as Pazielli's, locally famous as an ice cream store and neighborhood "spa"

during the 1950s and 1960s.

52 Broadway, currently serving as the Concilio Hispano, held Jimmy's Diner, an establishment specializing in American comfort food. They offered just the classics: BLT's, open face roast beef sandwiches, chicken soup, and the like.

67 Broadway, the Boston Spine Clinic served from the late 1940s as the Kelleher Funeral Home. This long time neighborhood funeral parlor was painted in somber colors to match its type of business: white with black shutters. It's a far cry from the current brilliant blue you find there now! The Kelleher 'K' still sits above the garage.



77 Broadway, Awards Unlimited, was the Broadway Café, an old fashioned pizzeria and bar that served "the best pizza around,"

a real family gathering place.

78 Broadway - Kennedy's, now Bairo's Liquors, existed in a day where stores were still highly specialized; the store sold mostly butter, cream, eggs, cheese, and of course 8 o'clock coffee.

1. Former Theatre/Future Home of Mudflats Studio - Located at 79-83 Broadway, Hurst's Broadway Theatre was built in 1915. By the late 1920s,

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



Broadway Coffee Shop (Eddie's Coke Shop) opened in 1931 by Jennie and Eddie Vartabedian, had entries onto both the street and the theatre lobby. Like a moment out of 'Happy Days' – there was a Juke Box, old fashioned telephone booths (since many didn't even have home phones yet!), and of course, the prerequisite "spa" or soda fountain.



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

3. Franklin Building, 88-90 Broadway - Built in 1919 from designs provided by an unknown architect, the Franklin Building is a brick and concrete commercial building with stylistic references to the Classical Revival,

and can be seen as an antecedent to the Art Deco style. Originally this building was associated with the Winter Hill Cooperative Bank and the Somerville Institute for Savings. *In the 1950s and 1960s, Royal Furniture was a real top notch furniture store that sold only the best quality.* The first floor was the showroom and the second floor was kept as storage. Today, several businesses use the ground floor: Wisdom Ingles, Betos Hair Salon, Melanie's Boutique

91 Broadway, Mason's Drug now Sathler Hair Design. There was a long standing rivalry between Mason's Drug and Grover's Pharmacy at 160 Broadway – both pharmacies were of the full service type that are hard to find today.



97-99 Broadway - Rainbow Spa, now Somerville Communications: This soda fountain or "spa" had a big counter where you could order "blends, frappes, and ice-cream." They also served as a stationary store that sold rulers, tacks, toys and other small office needs.

100 Broadway - Little Tony's now the Law Offices of Attorneys Marciello & DellaGrotte, catered to the predominantly immigrant Italian community, selling exclusively imported Italian canned goods.

104 Broadway - Tony's Foodland, now Tony's Foodland & Gauchao Brazilian Restaurant. In a serendipitous change of ownership, when Tony's Foodland was sold, it was to another Tony! Formerly owned by the Pino family, the large local food market even had a full fish market where you could buy fresh fried fish and clams. Around the corner the Pino Brothers, also ran a Broadway style carnival with rides for kids.

105 Broadway – The Somerset Savings Bank was replaced by a Rent-a-Center.

4. East Somerville Public Library, 115 Broadway - This east branch of the Somerville Library system was built with funds provided by Andrew Carnegie in 1918. It provides evidence of the great steel magnate's generosity in the realm of educational and cultural



East Somerville Branch was opened in 1912 in a rented store at 153 Perkins St.

community resources during the early 20th Century. A native of Scotland, Carnegie came from a background of limited means, but as a youth he was afforded access to the private library of a wealthy family. He credits this turn of events with helping him to become a successful "captain of industry," and this inspired Carnegie to fund hundreds of libraries throughout the United States and Great Britain. Somerville is fortunate to have him finance all three public libraries.

149 Broadway - Tuck's Department Store, now the Mudflat Clay Studio, was a top quality department store that sold exclusively name brands, like Van Huesen and American Girl. It's still remembered as "the place to go."

160 Broadway - Grover's Pharmacy, now Robi Tools, was the other half of the Mason's Drug rivalry - The two always kept one another on their toes.

161 Broadway, Park Garage Company, 1914 - This building is typical of an early 20th Century garage, which was primarily used for the storage of cars, It also features pick up and delivery services, a gas pump, as well as waiting rooms. The original owners were Arthur N. Park and Fred R. Curtis. The building had space for 40 cars, a machine shop for repairs in the basement, two 500-gallon gas tanks, and in addition , it housed a car rental business and a showroom for Ford, Marmon and Marathon cars and had a 1914 Packard limousine for rental!

5. 165 Broadway, aka Senior Center & former Fire Station - This red brick building was built in 1895 as Fire House Engine No. 2. It is difficult to



Broadway Fire Station, Somerville, Mass.

categorize this building stylistically as an early Florentine Palace because it is lacking the characteristic crenellated tower and other details. Designed as a fire station it provides evidence of the high density of the East Somerville neighborhood after 1890, and which notably accelerated after the electric trolley was introduced around 1900. Towards the end of the twentieth century the building became home to the community's elders as a senior center, as well as to the youth of the City.

167 Broadway - Clara's Bakery, now Sydney Accounting was known as "The

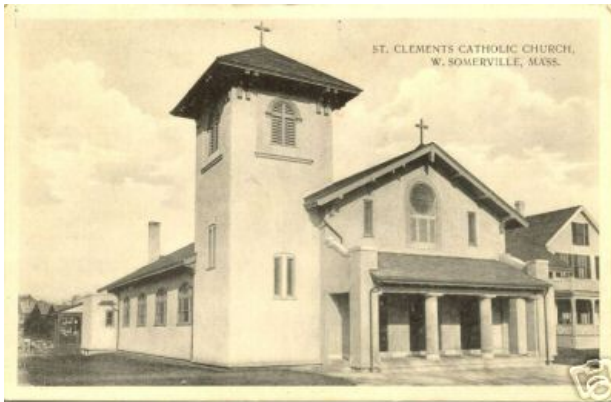
Famous Clara's Bakery," an American bakery, that sold everything you couldn't find in an Italian pastry shop on Broadway: whoopie pies, chocolate chip cookies, hermits, white bread, corn bread, and homemade baked beans on Saturdays.

6. Row Houses at 8-16 Cross Street East This group was built at the behest of Seman Klous, a brick maker and land developer. Currently in rough condition, these row houses were built around 1880 in the Mansard or Second Empire style that at that time was nearing the end of its popularity.



7. 8 Franklin Street In recent years, the current owner of 8 Franklin Street has restored and renovated this end gable Queen Anne house, built in 1890. Possessing a design that reflects the conservatism of the local building trades, the original owner was John T. Chandler, a Boston and Maine Railroad inspector.

8. St. Benedict's Church and Rectory – St. Benedict's Roman Catholic Church at 25 Hathorn Street was built in 1911 from designs provided by



archdiocesan architect Edward Sheehan. The church is of interest as a relatively rare example of the Mission and Spanish Colonial Revival styles. Although the church's original corner tower has been removed, the interior remains remarkably intact, well-detailed, and lavishly appointed. Blending

Midwestern Prairie style with Classical Revival elements, the church's rectory at 25 Arlington Street was built in 1934. St. Benedict's Roman Catholic Church has been long associated with the Italian community residing in East Somerville.

9. 157 Perkins Street Situated at the corner of Franklin and Perkins Streets, 157 Perkins Street is an interesting example of the transitional Federal Greek Revival style built around 1850. Note the six over six windows, entablature, pilasters, sidelights and the gable end returns.

10. 1 Webster Street As we head south from Broadway, stop to consider the Italianate house at 1 Webster Street. Built in 1851-1852 this house dates to the earliest phase of the neighborhood's development. Built around 1890 for John C. Egerly, a Boston dealer, the house later acquired a wrap-around verandah and an oriel window that projects from the second floor of the main façade, due to the efforts of Dr. Sanford Hanscom, the third owner of the house.



11. 75, 77 and 81 Pearl Street Before heading east along Pearl Street, take a look at three side-by-side residences at 75, 77 and 81 Pearl Street. Their charm derives from their vernacular elements, especially the saw-cut bargeboards and the columns of the front porch.



12. 70 Pearl Street Continuing along Pearl



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

13. Florence Street District

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



39-43, 42-44, 45-47, 46-48 and 50-52 Florence Street A combination of variable terrain and decidedly urbane architecture accounts for much of this area's interest. The flat, elevated plane of Pearl Street quickly shifts to a steep hillside that descends to Washington Street. The Florence Street properties constitute a kind of urban oasis within a suburban housing context—here, brick row houses that would look at home in Boston neighborhoods, as well as wooden multi-family Queen Anne residences of unique design were built during the period of 1870-1885. Herbert Cole, a bridge constructor, built the wooden apartments at 46-48 and 50-52 Florence Street that feature steep front steps and A-shaped, typically Queen Anne gables containing raised sunburst motifs.



14. Pearl Street District

This trio of residences could constitute a small local historic district. Built in 1896, **31 Pearl Street** is a towered Queen Anne residence built for Henry S. Wright, a milk can manufacturer. The architect was Shepard S. Woodcock, who was honored by author Edward S. Samuels in



his renowned book Somerville Past and Present (1897), where a photograph of this house is featured.

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

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

15. 64 Mt. Vernon Street This house was built ca. 1870 for Charles S. Powers, a local grain dealer. By 1885 it was still owned by Powers but now also housed a men's social club called The Webcowit Club. The club was reportedly fairly exclusive—limited to prominent businessmen and intended "to promote social discourse." During the late 1800s numerous social/charitable men's clubs bearing Native American names sprang up throughout New England, along with organizations like the Elks and The Knights of Columbus. More typically, these clubs were housed in the upper floors of commercial blocks in business districts.

16. Mt. Vernon/Perkins Street District

This is a cluster of five-buildings proposed for designation as an expansion to existing Perkins and Mt. Vernon Streets Local Historic District that encompasses stylish and substantial examples of houses dating from the second half of the nineteenth century.

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

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



Frederick Hosmer, a poultry dealer at Faneuil Hall Market, hired an unidentified architect to design **51 Mt. Vernon Street** in 1892. It is a good example of a center hall Colonial Revival house that provides evidence that East Somerville was still a fashionable address at the close of the nineteenth century.

Blending a Queen Anne, end gable form with Colonial Revival elements, this well-preserved residence might be called the “House That Burlap Built” because its first owner Thomas L. Davis was a burlap dealer in Boston.



50 Mt. Vernon Street, built in 1895 is noteworthy for its front porch, complete with

paired Doric columns, as well as bold scroll brackets beneath the gable’s overhang.



84 Perkins

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



17. Mount Vernon Street National Register Historic District

29 Mt. Vernon Street is one of the very few homes in Somerville and Cambridge that have full-length triple-hung Greek Revival Windows. The Ionic Columns are also more ornate than those on the neighboring houses.

26 Mt. Vernon Street was much altered over the years; however the current owners are in the process of restoring it to its former glory. Currently, they have been rehabilitating the original windows.



20 Mount Vernon Street is unique in having its full façade flush-boarded. This was a direct reference to the stone construction of the Greek temples that served as a model and inspiration to this style.

16 Mt. Vernon Street the Harrison Hutchins house was built around 1850 and remained in the family until 1984. Harrison Hutchins was a “whitener” or employee of a bleachery.

8 Mt. Vernon Street The Ebenezer Davis House is another excellent example of a two and one half story side-hall plan Greek Revival; note the paneled pilasters and the Doric columns on the porch. Ebenezer Davis was a marine inspector in Boston. His name appears on the 1852 Map of Somerville, making him one of earliest members of the East Somerville community.



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

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

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

Please know that this walk is part of our Calendar of Events for May, which is Preservation Month in the City of Somerville. Visit our website for more information about up-coming events