

So Fine a Prospect

A Walking Tour of Prospect Hill & Union Square, Somerville, MA



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.

- ★ 1 The Somerville Central Library
- ★ 2 The Highland Apartments
- ★ 3 The Queen Anne House
- ★ 4 The Italianate Mansard Cottages
- ★ 5 26 Summit Avenue
- ★ 6 Intersection of Walnut Street, Summit Avenue,
and Boston Street
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- ★ 10 The First United Methodist Church
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- ★ 13 First municipal Police Station
- ★ 14 The Prospect Hill Congregational Church at 17 Bow Street
- ★ 15 & 16 The Hill Building
- ★ 17 The Mid-Nite Convenience Store
- ★ 18 St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church



→ **1** **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. 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, funded its construction. Later in life, Carnegie credited his legendary success to this early access to books and initiated his "Greek Temples of Learning" campaign to build libraries all across America.

→ **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, 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."

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

anthemion



egg and dart



Sanborn brick advertisement



→ **4** 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 1600's France and was popularized along the boulevards of Paris during the 1850's and 60's before making its way to the States. Also of note is the raised saw-cut gingerbread ornamentation on 47 Vinal Avenue.



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, whose sweeping roof slopes are exhibited here. The name is a visual reference to the Colonial-era form of container 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.

→ **5** Built ca. 1886, **26 Summit Avenue** is a mature example of the Queen Anne style that typically exhibits different materials with contrasting surface textures, such as the red brick and wood shingles



combination seen here. The half-timbering at the gable and dormers of the main facade intentionally recalls houses built in Medieval England. One of its early owners was John E. Sylvester, a prominent iron master from Hanover, Massachusetts who owned a spike and nail factory in East Somerville.

→ **6** 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 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!

door hood



bracket



door hood



door hood



→ **7** 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**. When originally built ca. 1845, the house

was surrounded by open land and considered isolated from much of Somerville. At the intersection of Boston and Greenville Streets, pause to look north and 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 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 the 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 event.

→ **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).



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. *continued*

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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 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. 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, Italian, Irish, Vietnamese and African heritage.

→ **10** 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 seven residential 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 charm of plain, attached dwellings built for working class families during the early 1800s. This set of unique row houses sits as the visual anchor of this amazing intersection.

→ **12** 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.

→ **13** Well-known Boston architect George H. Clough designed the City's first **Police Station** at **50 Bow Street** (1874) in the Victorian Gothic style. During the 1870s, he designed



many new schools, firehouses, and police stations for Boston and surrounding areas. The City recently sold the building to a private developer who has rebuilt its original mansard roof which was lost to fire in the 1940s, and converted the handsome structure to fourteen condominium units.

→ **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, this 1880's Somerville church relies on the use of polychromatic, light-hued

granite and brownstone trim for maximum visual effect. Converted to residential condominiums in the late 1980s, several home owners now enjoy spaces illuminated by spectacular stained glass windows.

→ **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 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 Union Square** maintains its exemplary intact Victorian window surrounds. It was named for shoe dealer Phillip Eberle, who built the Masonic Block (1869), the first major commercial block in the Square that once stood to the east of the **Eberle Building**.

→ **17** Union Square's oldest extant building is **the Mid-Nite Convenience Store** at **14-15 Union Square**. 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 **364 Washington and Webster Streets**. Until St. Joseph's Church (1870-1874) opened, 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 Victorian Gothic church for local residents. In 1871 the first services were held in the lower church, where Monsignor Christopher C. McGrath served as the 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



gothic capital



doric order



Thank you for exploring one of Somerville's many historic neighborhoods. For other tours, contact the Staff via 617.625.6600 ext. 2500, or go to www.ci.somerville.ma.us/historicpreservation.

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Topographical map and street map of Somerville provided by Joseph Merkel, OSPCD

Bibliography: *Beyond the Neck: The Architecture and Development of Somerville* by Carole Zellie (updated 1990); *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.

This publication is produced by the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission in collaboration with ArtsUnion, a Somerville Arts Council cultural economic initiative.

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.

2007 marks the third year of ArtsUnion, an initiative designed to boost the cultural economic development of Union Square, Somerville. The Somerville Arts Council and the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development created ArtsUnion, in partnership with ArtSomerville, Brickbottom Artists Association, Washington Street Art Center, the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission, the Somerville Chamber of Commerce, Somerville Community Access Television, Somerville Open Studios, Third Life Studio, and Union Square Main Streets.

Through funding from the Massachusetts Cultural Council's John and Abigail Adams Program and the City of Somerville, ArtsUnion cultivates and promotes the Square's diverse artist and business communities. During 2007, ArtsUnion will present a series of ten cultural events/performances, four signature markets, as well as launch "Union Tube," a TV show devoted to the local arts community. Throughout the year and into 2008, ArtsUnion will continue to present Union Square ethnic markets tours and historic walking tours; install streetscape furniture and lightscape projects; and begin to implement the work surrounding a zoning/regulation review to further support the arts, commerce, and the distinct character of the Square.



www.somervilleartscouncil.org
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