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CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

ALTERATION TO A HISTORIC PROPERTY STAFF REPORT

Site / District(s) 53-55 Meacham Road, – 1892 Henry R Glover House,
Meacham Road, Campbell Park LHD

Case: HPC 12.107

Applicant Name: Margaret Rumsey for Life
Applicant Address: 55 Meacham Road,
Somerville MA 02144

Date of Application: 9/28/12
Legal Notice: Replace slate roof with architectural shingles.

Staff Recommendation: **Certificate of Hardship**
Date of Public Hearing: 10/16/12

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

*1. Architectural
Description:*

This large symmetrical, two-family building deviates from the usual gable-end plan found in most buildings on Meacham Road. The two centrally located entrances with a hipped roof porch are flanked by imposing polygonal projecting bays with conical roofs. The large slate roof of the main block has clipped corners in the templar side gable ends. The building is sheathed in weathered shingles and rests on a concrete foundation.



53-55 Meacham Road circa 1988

2. *Historical Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:*

The property is one of many houses in the immediate area that was built in the 1890s when the subdivision was created. Although the subdivision was laid out in 1847 by George Meacham there was no development until the 1890s. Much of the land on Meacham Road was owned by Henry Glover and Charles H. Saunders of Cambridge in the 1870s and 1880s. Glover, a real estate investor from Cambridge built many of the houses, sold some, and retained others for rental income.

Much of the Davis Square area became the homes of railroad and streetcar commuters and is evidence of the suburban building boom of the late 19th century. Streetcar service along nearby Massachusetts Avenue to Porter Square and to Davis Square provided easy access to Boston and Cambridge for employment. This area was also home for many Somerville workers. By the 1870s Davis Square was evolving into a commercial center with several commercial blocks and good transportation with the Somerville Horse Railroad Company and the Boston and Maine Railroad.

City directories indicate that Alfred C. Harvey, railroad agent, lived here in close proximity to the car barns of the Union Horse Rail Line and the Arlington - Lexington Branch of the Boston and Maine Railroad.



II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. *Proposal of Alteration:*

1. Replace slate roof with architectural shingles on east side (front) of roof.

III. FINDINGS FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

1. *Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:* No Applications for work have been requested or approved.
2. *Precedence:* In the case of slate roof removal and replacement, this has occurred only once in the past 12 years when a Certificate of Hardship was issued due to the condition of the Pennsylvania slate which tends to be the "soft" slate with a life expectancy of 75-125 years. *"The resulting alterations are not intended to be permanent changes but are a stop-gap measure to stabilize the building. When the time comes for replacement, slate shingles must be used to match the currently existing ones."*
3. *Considerations:*
 - *What is the visibility of the proposal?* This is extremely visible on the main façade of the house located near the bend of on Meacham Road near Davis Square

- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?* The owner is elderly. She requested that her contractor who had been maintaining her house for her to repair the leaking roof. He had been making small repairs over time but he said that repair was no longer feasible. Due to the cost, they opted for an architectural shingle. The inspector who issued the Building Permit did not check either the maps with designated properties marked or the list of designated properties. Therefore the contractor was never informed that the property was part of a designated Local Historic District. The Historic Preservation Staff only learned of the alteration after the slates had been removed and much of the work had been completed. The rear portion of the roof is still slate.
- *Does the proposal coincide with the General Approach set forth in the Design Guidelines?* This alteration does not meet HPC Guidelines for appropriateness. This is a major alteration of character defining feature.
 - A. *The design approach to each property should begin with the premise that the **features of historic and architectural significance described in the Study Committee report must be preserved.** In general, this tends to minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.*
 - B. *Changes and additions to the property and its environment that have taken place over the course of time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have developed significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected (LATER IMPORTANT FEATURES will be the term used hereafter to convey this concept).*
 - C. *Whenever possible, deteriorated material or architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.*
 - D. *When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.*
 - E. *Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.*
 - F. *The Commission will give design review priority to those portions of the property which are visible from public ways or those portions which it can be reasonably inferred may be visible in the future.*
- *Does the proposal coincide with the appropriate Specific Guidelines as set forth in the Design Guidelines?* No, it does not.

B. Roofs

1. *Preserve the integrity of the original or later important roof shape.* The roof shape has not been altered.
2. *Retain the original roof covering whenever possible. If the property has a slate roof, conserve the roof slates. Slate is a near-permanent roofing material, and deterioration is generally caused by rusted roofing nails.* The slate roof and flashing on the main façade have not been retained, losing some of the definition of the roof. The rear which is visible from Lester Terrace and Kingston Street has been retained.

3. ***Whenever possible, replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail.*** The slate shingles have been removed and replaced with an architectural shingle of completely different character. There is no continuity regarding the composition, color, shape size or texture. The installation techniques are also different.
4. ***Preserve the architectural features that give the roof its distinctive character, such as cornices, gutters, iron filigree, cupolas, dormers and brackets. Downspouts should be inconspicuously located and should be painted to match the color of the siding.*** The loss of visible metal flashing alters the perception of the building. The alterations in the roof angles are no longer clearly delineated.
5. ***New dormers will be permitted if they are related to the forms, proportions, size and arrangement of existing windows, and constructed in matching materials and colors. If possible, new dormers should be confined to the rear of the house.*** No dormers have been installed.
6. ***Skylights with flat profiles may be installed on the rear of the property.*** No skylights have been added.
7. ***Utility equipment, such as television antennae, air conditioners, solar collectors and other mechanical units should be restricted to the rear of the property or on portions of the roof that are not visible from a public way. If no other placement is possible, air conditioning and other cooling units on street facades should be of the slim-line type or set flush with the surface of the building and painted the same color as the window trim.*** No new utility equipment has been added to the main visible façade of the building.

With the exception of retaining the roof shape and the back of the building, the work undertaken is not appropriate; one needs to look at the guidelines for a Certificate of Hardship. ***Under the Massachusetts General Law, the granting of a certificate of hardship will be based on "conditions especially affecting the building or structure involved, but not affecting the historic district generally." In other words, the hardship must be unique to the applicant's property and affect it in a particular manner. It cannot constitute a condition which generally afflicts other property within the district. For instance, a fire escape may be essential on a particular building in order to keep the building up to fire safety codes. That would be a specific condition affecting a particular building and might warrant the granting of a certificate of hardship. A certificate of hardship for vinyl siding is not a specific condition affecting a particular building. All the buildings in the district have the same condition - they all need protection from the weather and vinyl siding is inappropriate on all buildings found in the district. The majority of the surrounding houses have slate roofs of the same age so that the condition was not unique to this house and removal of the roof was inconsistent with the preservation intent of MGL 40c. However, this is the only known building in the Meacham Road/Campbell Park Historic District to receive a Building Permit from the Inspectional Services Division for an alteration without prior review by the HPC Staff for the Commission.***

Under Massachusetts General Law chapter 40C, the approval of a certificate of hardship should not have "substantial detriment to the public welfare" or "substantial derogation from the intent and purposes" of MGL Chapter 40C. According to the purpose section of MGL 40C, local historic districts are "to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of the commonwealth and its cities and towns or their architecture, and through the maintenance and improvement of settings for such buildings and places and the encouragement of design compatible therewith." For instance, the removal of architectural trim would not promote the

welfare of the public and would derogate from the intent of MGL Chapter 40C. While the distinctive characteristics of a slate roof have been lost, the form has not been lost and the roof may be returned to a closer semblance of its original material in approximately 30 years under another owner and with, one hopes, a better match of roofing materials.

Applications for certificates of hardship based on financial loss must demonstrate a substantial deprivation of beneficial uses of the property. For instance, an application for a certificate of hardship to replace a duplex with a three unit building does not constitute a deprivation of beneficial use as the existing duplex provides the beneficial use and a reasonable economic use of the property.

Applications for certificates of hardship based on a financial hardship may be requested by the historic district commission to supply financial and other records. These records may include: 1) the amount paid for the property, the date of purchase and the party from whom purchased (including a description of the relationship, if any, between the owner and the person from whom the property was purchased; 2) the assessed value of the land and improvements thereon according to the most recent tax assessments; 3) real estate taxes for the previous two years; 4) annual debt service, if any, for the previous two years; 5) all appraisals obtained within the previous two years by the owner or applicant in connection with purchases, financing or ownership of the property; 6) any listing of the property for sale or rent, price asked and offers received, if any; 7) any consideration by the owner as to profitable adaptive uses of the property. If the property is income-producing, an owner may be asked to provide: 1) annual gross income from the property for the previous two years; 2) itemized operating and maintenance expenses for the previous two years; 3) cash flow, if any during the same period.

Applications for certificates of hardship based on a financial hardship may be requested by the historic district commission to supply a reasonable number of good faith estimates for products and services from contractors, suppliers and tradespeople.

Examples of potential certificates of hardships include fire escapes, utilities and accessibility improvements when other more appropriate designs are not feasible.

The application for a certificate of hardship shall be carefully scrutinized and granted in rare circumstances only.

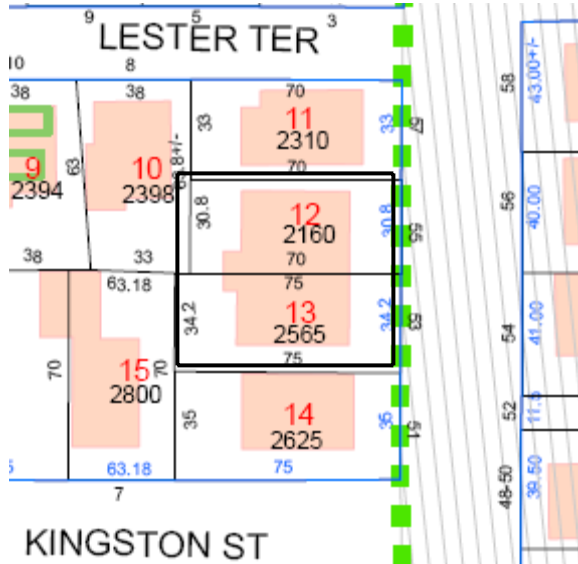
III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Staff recommendation is based on a complete application and supporting materials, as submitted by the Applicant, and an analysis of the historic and architectural value and significance of the site, building or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture, material and color of the features involved, and the relation of such features of buildings and structures in the area, in accordance with the required findings that are considered by the Somerville Historic District Ordinance for a Historic District Certificate. This report may be revised or updated with new a recommendation or findings based upon additional information provided to Staff or through more in depth research conducted during the public hearing process.

Staff determines that the alteration for which an application has been filed is not appropriate for and compatible with the preservation and protection of the Meacham Road/Campbell Park Local Historic District Local Historic District; therefore Staff recommends granting a **Certificate of Hardship** because an error was

made on the part of the City that did not affect other buildings in the district. It is unfair to expect the current homeowner to tear off architectural shingles and replace the roofing with slate after the fact due to someone else's error. This Certificate should be conditional on this being good for the life of the architectural shingles. At the time when the owner of this home seeks to replace the roof of this structure, that owner must replace the roof with slate to match the existing slate on the rear of the building. The applicant shall file a certified copy of this certificate with the Southern Middlesex Registry of Deeds to provide notice to future owners of the conditional approval of this certificate.

53-55 Meacham Road



Address, add map