



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DETERMINATION OF PREFERABLY PRESERVED STAFF REPORT

Site:	640 Mystic Avenue
Case:	HPC 2015.085
Applicant Name:	Jai Singh Khalsa
Date of Application:	12/2/2015
Date of Significance:	1/26/2016
Recommendation:	Preferably Preserved
Hearing Date:	1/16/2016

**A determination of Preferably Preserved begins a nine month Demolition Delay.*

I. Meeting Summary: Determination of Significance

On Tuesday, January 26, 2016, the Historic Preservation Commission, in accordance with the Demolition Review Ordinance (2003-05), made a determination that 640 Mystic Avenue is Significant. Per Section 2.17.B, this decision is found on the following criteria:

Section 2.17.B - The structure is at least 50 years old;

and

(i) *The structure is importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth;*

and / or

(ii) *The structure is historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of building construction, or association with a reputed architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of buildings or structures.*



According to *Criteria 2.17.B*, listed above, historic map and directory research identifies the structure as c. 1870. The dwelling at 640 Mystic Avenue is present on the 1866 Walling Map of Boston and Vicinity but is present on the 1874 Hopkins Atlas. Residents are found in a circa 1870 listing of residents in a ledger found in the City Archives but not in the 1869 City Directory.

In accordance with *Criteria (i)*, listed above, the Commission agreed with Staff findings, due to the association of this structure with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City due to an important association with the Boston Bottle Works, Irish immigration and employment, and the type of housing typical for the working classes.

In accordance with *Criteria (ii)*, listed above, the Commission agreed with Staff findings, that 640 Mystic Avenue is historically and architecturally significant due to its form as a high basement workers cottage from the early 1870s within a group of similar buildings associated with the Boston Bottle Works, Samuel Oakman, inventor and Irish immigration. The subject parcel conveys significance through its location and form as well as, to a moderate degree, integrity of design.

II. Additional Information

Additional Research:

- The Boston Bottle Works (1870-1877) had continuing financial problems beginning as early as 1875 due to an incomplete accounting of receipts and payments according to an article in the Boston Globe dated November 19, 1875. The only known officer of the Boston Bottle Works was Samuel Oakman who held numerous patents on insulators and related electrical equipment. He continued to work in the glass insulator business until the late 1800s.
- A few more residents have been found for the houses on Mystic Avenue circa 1870. The residents' names indicate that they were of Irish ancestry and were probably recent arrivals in the country as can be derived from similar workers found on the 1870 and 1880 census.
- Mystic Avenue at this location was constructed on top of the remains of the Middlesex Canal as it wended its way from Sullivan Square to Lowell.
- Besides the Boston Bottle Works, the Fisk Brickyards and Quarry were also located nearby. During the 20th Century, the Hinckley Rendering Plant located on the Mystic River made soap and other items from the residues of the slaughter houses and tannery yards of Somerville.
- No structural information has been received.

Comparable Structures:

There are a number of single-family dwellings with a modest 1½ story massing located throughout the City. There are three comparable dwellings located along Mystic Avenue and are variations on the theme of high basement workers cottage all constructed and owned by the Boston Bottle Works. Comparable structures within the City include:

- 25 Clyde Street (LHD)
- 342 Lowell Street (LHD)
- 60 Linden Avenue (LHD)
- 80 Properzi Way
- 27 Dane Avenue
- 37 Fisk Avenue

Predominant differences between the comparable dwellings and the subject dwelling are orientations toward the street, heights of basements, and the shapes and sizes



of the ells. They were all constructed for workers and inhabited by families for generations. For the most part they are well-maintained and retain much of their original character. Properzi Way, Dane Avenue and Fisk Avenue are also in existing neighborhoods of workers housing of earlier and later dates than the Mystic Avenue structures.



Top: 25 Clyde Street (1860); 342 Lowell Street (1861); 80 Properzi Way (c.1850).
Bottom: 27 Dane Avenue (c.1874); 37 Fisk Avenue (1866), 60 Linden Avenue (1861).

If the Commission determines that the demolition of the significant building or structure would be detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City, such building or structure shall be considered a preferably preserved building or structure. (Ordinance 2003-05, Section 4.2.d)

A determination regarding if the demolition of the subject building is detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City should consider the following:

- a) *How does this building or structure compose or reflect features which contribute to the heritage of the City?*

The subject structure, pre-1874, is a 1½ story gable-end dwelling in a local style using readily available and inexpensive materials with an enclosed front porch. The original form, massing (including a small rear ell or mud-room), and single-bay side fenestration pattern is clearly evident. Remaining architectural features are few but include the shallow eaves on the primary façade in keeping with working class cottages. Doors, windows and roof materials have been replaced, but the building retains integrity of design due to the simple form and massing. In addition, it is part of a small collection of circa 1870 structures along this portion of Mystic Avenue that retain a moderate degree of historical significance and architectural

integrity. While the subject dwelling has some alteration, the nineteenth century historical context is clearly represented.

- b) What is the remaining integrity of the structure? The National Park Service defines integrity as the ability of a property to convey significance.*

The Commission found that integrity of this one-family dwelling is retained within the location and form, as well as integrity of design. The structure retains integrity of location through siting and orientation as well as through spatial relationships to other buildings along Mystic Avenue.

- c) What is the level (local, state, national) of significance?*

The Commission determined that this structure is Significant due to a historical association with the Boston Bottle Works, Samuel Oakman, Irish immigration and employment, and the type of housing typical for the working classes.

- d) What is the visibility of the structure with regard to public interest (Section 2.17.B.ii) if demolition were to occur?*

The subject parcel is highly visible along Mystic Avenue due to its proximity to the main artery into Somerville from Interstate 93. The building as one of four in a small 19th century residential development stands out as the first encountered

- e) What is the scarcity or frequency of this type of resource in the City?*

Dwellings from this time period and of this level of architectural integrity are extremely rare within the City and likely within the surrounding communities as well. While there are other working class neighborhoods in the City such Duck Village, Allen Street, Horace Street and Hinckley/Magoun, the houses are generally of a more recent era.

Upon a consideration of the above criteria (a-e), is the demolition of the subject building detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City?

The Commission found the subject parcel Significant due to the association of this structure with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City due to an important association with the Boston Bottle Works, Irish immigration and employment, and the type of housing typical for the working classes.

The Commission also determined that the structure is significant due to its history as a workers' cottage, which is visible in the scale, massing, form, and simplicity of design and detail. It is historically significant as part of a cluster of buildings with a similar history and offers a view into the earliest development stages of this part of the City as it began to see job creation and the construction of associated workers' housing in the latter half of the 19th century.

Significance is also due to the ability of the subject parcels to convey integrity regarding location and form and design, specifically with regard to the simple high basement cottage constructed for workers, a style that can be found in sections of North Cambridge and the Patch, former brick yards where the water table was high and brick readily available.

The Commission found that integrity of this historically 1-family dwelling is retained within the location, form, design, style, detailing, and also the clustering of the structures. The structures retain integrity of location through siting and orientation as well as through spatial relationships to other buildings along this section of Mystic Avenue. The subject structures retain a significant level of historical and architectural integrity.

With the entirety of the considerations taken into account, Staff finds the potential demolition of 640 Mystic Avenue detrimental to the heritage of the City.

IV. Recommendation

Recommendations are based upon an analysis by Historic Preservation Staff of the permit application and the required findings for the Demolition Review Ordinance, which requires archival and historical research, and an assessment of historical and architectural significance, conducted prior to the public hearing for a Determination of Preferably Preserved. This report may be revised or updated with a new recommendation and/or findings based upon additional information provided to Staff or through further research.

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In accordance with the Demolition Review Ordinance (2003-05), Section 4.D, Staff find the potential demolition of the subject structure detrimental to the heritage of the City, and consequently in the best interest of the public to preserve or rehabilitate. Therefore, due to the reasons noted above, **Staff recommend that the Historic Preservation Commission find 640 Mystic Avenue Preferably Preserved.**

If the Historic Preservation Commission determines the structure is Preferably Preserved, the Building Inspector may issue a demolition permit at anytime, upon receipt of written advice from the Commission that there is no reasonable likelihood that either the owner or some other person or group is willing to purchase, preserve, rehabilitate or restore the subject building or structure (Ord. 2003-05, Section 4.5).

640 Mystic Avenue, aerial view and street view

