



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

*HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION*

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**ALTERATION TO A HISTORIC PROPERTY STAFF REPORT**

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**Site / District(s):** 9-11 Aldersey Street / LHD  
**Case:** HPC 2013.085  
**Applicant Name:** Gerard Meeham, Trustee for G&T Realty Trust  
**Applicant Address:** 19 Ames Avenue, Canton, MA 01757

**Date of Application:** 10/31/2013  
**Legal Notice:** *Restore and alter the existing historic structure; construct two additional residential structures.*  
**Recommendation:** Certificate of Appropriateness to alter/restore the existing historic structure; and Deny Certificate of Appropriateness for two additional structures  
**Public Hearing:** Tuesday, November 19, 2013

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**I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION**

*Photo 2012*

*Architectural Description:*

The subject structure, c. 1849, is one of the earliest known dwellings still existent on Prospect Hill. This dwelling is a 2½ story farmhouse, three bays in width, with a side-gable and a shed dormer on both roof planes. The primary façade has a center entry with flanking windows and porch (later addition) that extends the width of the structure while the second story has a centered pair of narrow windows and windows flanking either side. The dwelling is two rooms deep with an arch window beneath each gable end. The side wing, also 2½ stories, has details consistent with that of the main massing.



Architectural details that illustrate the original Greek Revival style are the frieze and architrave beneath the cornice line, a wide trim band beneath the eaves of the gable, and corner pilasters with capitols. Some porch details also illustrate the Greek Revival style; however, this building also illustrates the Italianate style, through additions from a later period, which includes some porch detail, arched windows, and the paired front entry doors with arched windows.

*Historical Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:*

*(The following information is predominately obtained from the MHC Form B, dated 2002.)*

*1852 Draper map*

Aldersey Street is not illustrated on the 1852 Draper map, but as the map illustrates one house in this general location. Therefore, it is likely that this structure is the oldest remaining building on the southern slope of Prospect Hill. This building represents a connection with early development of the highest hill in Somerville. Historical documentation attributes this property to Robert Aldersey Vinal, Jr. shortly after he purchased land off Walnut Street in 1849. However, deed research and later map evidence confirm that his brother, Quincy Adams Vinal, was the first and long time owner of this property.



The 1849 deed states that Nathaniel Hawkins sold this property then consisting of almost 3 acres to Quincy Vinal, a Boston trader. The land was bound by Walnut Street and the land of Robert Aldersey Vinal as well as the land of various members of the Hawkins family. Aldersey Street was laid out in a plan of lots drawn up by Quincy Vinal in 1868. Most of the land on this slope of Prospect Hill had been owned by members of the Vinal family and, as noted above, it was Quincy Vinal who was responsible for the subdivision that eventually formed this residential neighborhood.

Maps and directory research confirm this c.1849 dwelling as the residence of Quincy Adams Vinal, his wife, Augusta Smith Pierce Vinal, and their seven daughters and one son. The brothers were partners in 1848 in a Boston grain business, from which, Robert Aldersey Vinal retired in the early 1860s; Quincy was the business head until his retirement in 1876. Following Quincy's retirement from the grain business, he became president of the Somerville National Bank until 1894, and was a director of Cambridge Gas Light Company until his death in 1904. Following his death, the "Misses Vinal" lived here well into the 1920s. City Directories indicate that four Vinal sisters lived here into the 1920s; two died in the late 1920s and two remained throughout the 1930s. Mary Vinal was last listed here in 1941, at 84 years old, and Quincy P. Vinal was last listed here in 1942, age 81. Throughout the time the Vinal family lived at this location, the house was listed as 9 Aldersey Street. Conversion to a multiple-family unit occurred in the late twentieth century.

This property is eligible for the National Register as both an individual building and as part of a district. This structure is significant for its transitional Greek Revival to Italianate style architectural representation and as one of the first dwellings constructed atop Prospect Hill. The first owners and builders were instrumental in shaping these late nineteenth century neighborhoods, as well as the larger community, and are recognized in street names such as Vinal Avenue and Aldersey Street. Furthermore, this is the only

remaining Vinal residence built for one of three Vinals (Robert Aldersey, Robert Aldersey Jr. and Quincy Adams).

## II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### *Proposal of Alteration:*

The Applicant proposes to construct a residential development which includes alterations to the existing historic structure (Building B) and construction of two new residential structures (Buildings A and C) on either side of the existing building. The footprint for each new building is proposed to be approximately 3,000 square feet. The proposal also includes parking for 22 vehicles. The height of the proposed structures does not exceed the height of the historic structure. The roof form and detailing have been chosen by the design team in an effort to be compatible with and contextual to the Aldersey Street streetscape.

**Building A** is proposed as a 2½ story, Second Empire style dwelling. The roof would be a Mansard form with synthetic slate shingles and copper flashing as well as gable dormers and a central pavilion component above the main entry. The first floor would be composed of a projecting main entry with a full front porch that wraps slightly around each side. The porch would include a low pitch roof with synthetic slate shingles, crown molding, brackets, and dentils. Porch posts would be chamfered and the entry door would have sidelights. The rear portion of the structure would maintain the same roofline and the form of the rear massing is meant to emulate a later addition. Windows would be two-over-two with style appropriate headers, sills and casings. Siding materials would be clapboards with corner details of fluted trim boards and the cornice would have period brackets over fascia boards.



**Building B**, the existing historic structure, would have the clapboard porch rail removed and replaced with style appropriate railings and balusters. The fire escapes would also be removed and utility lines would be placed underground to reduce obscuring the historic building.

**Building C** is proposed as a 2½ story, Queen Anne style dwelling. The roof shape would consistent with the side gable of the historic building and include a square tower component, decorative gable trusses, and both single and double gable dormers. The first floor would be composed of a full front porch that also wraps slightly around each side and a front entrance with a period appropriate glass and panel door, framed with fluted jambs and molding. The rear portion of the structure would maintain the same roofline and the form of the rear massing is meant to emulate a later addition. Windows would be two-over-one with style appropriate headers, sills and casings.



Siding materials would be clapboards with corner trim board, brackets and wood shingle detailing in each gable end.

**Site Plan:** The construction of Building A and Building C requires modification to the site plan surrounding the existing Building B. A one-way driveway circles the house, flanked by garage doors that face the sides of Building B. The rear yard is replaced with 12 surface parking spaces.

### III. FINDINGS FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

#### 1. *Background:*

The subject application makes specific reference to a recent case remanding an earlier ZBA zoning decision. This decision of the Land Court provides instructions to the ZBA as it relates to a zoning decision made about this same application at a previous point in time. While this remanded case instructs the Zoning Board of Appeals to await a decision from the Historic Preservation Commission, it does not change the fundamental role of the Commission in reviewing this case. The Commission is to review this project based upon the standard of 'appropriateness' as established in the local regulation and relevant state law.

#### 2. *Prior Certificates Issued:*

April 2006, A Certificate of Appropriateness was issued to open up both porches and reconstruct the side porch with porch posts to match the existing porch posts but proportionally smaller; and to install railings and balusters on both porches no higher than 34".

#### 3. *Considerations:*

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*  
The new structures are set 15' off the street, which obstructs view of the historic structure and alters the streetscape. Due to the large massing of the proposed new development, which would extend twenty feet to the rear lot line, the proposed buildings would be highly visible, not only along Aldersey Street, but also from Summit Avenue and Walnut Street.
- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?*  
The historic structure has been painted within recent years and appears moderately maintained.

*The primary purpose of the Preservation Ordinance is to encourage preservation and high design standards in Local Historic Districts, in order to safeguard the architectural heritage of the City. Guidelines have been developed to ensure that rehabilitation efforts, alterations, and new construction all respect the design fabric of the districts and do not adversely affect their present architectural integrity.*

- *Does the proposal coincide with the General Approach set forth in the Design Guidelines?*
  - 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.*



Features described in the Form B will not be altered as a result of this proposal. While the surrounding landscape features of the lot are not described in the Form B, the parcel will be significantly altered as well as the Aldersey streetscape. This street is short and the dwellings located on the south side of the street are setback approximately 15' while the dwellings on the north side are setback significantly farther, more than 30' feet. Siting two buildings on the north side of the lot with a 15' setback will substantially modify the north side of the streetscape due to the regularity of the existing setback of 30' and obscure visibility of the existing building.

*9-11 Aldersey  
Street, aerial*



- *Does the proposal coincide with the appropriate Specific Guidelines as set forth in the Design Guidelines?*

**D. Porches, steps, trim and other exterior architectural elements**

*Retain and repair porches and steps that are original or later important features, including such items as railings, balusters, columns, posts, brackets, roofs, ornamental ironwork and other important decorative items. If new pieces are needed, they should match as closely as possible the style, shape, scale and materials of the old.*

The proposal requests to remove the inappropriate portions that enclose the bottom portion of the existing front porch and replace this with appropriate railings and balusters.

*Fire escapes are very conspicuous features and, as a rule, should only be placed on the rear of the building, or where they are least visible from a public way*

The proposal requests to remove the fire escape on the primary façade of the building.

**H. Landscape Features and Paving**

*The general intent of this section is to preserve the existing or later essential landscape features that enhance the property.*

The proposal would eliminate the green open space that currently surrounds the historic structure and helps to identify the original historic context of a farmstead. While the surrounding area originally included orchards and gardens, and these features are no longer existent, the remaining open space on the parcel articulates that later subdividing took place, which created Aldersey Street and the present residential context of the southern slope of Prospect Hill.

*It is recognized that often the environment surrounding the property has a character, scale and street pattern quite different from that existing when the building was constructed. Thus, changes must frequently be made to accommodate the new condition, and the landscape treatment can be seen as a transition feature between the structure and its newer surroundings.*

While the surrounding environment has changed considerably since the date of construction, c. 1849, the addition of two new residential dwellings would eliminate the open space, which would remove any recognition for the original historic context as a farmstead. Therefore, the landscape, which is green open space, would not be a transitional feature, it would simply cease to exist.

*The original layout and materials of the walks, steps and paved areas should be maintained if significant grade changes constitute an important feature of the structure or site. Consideration will be given to alterations if it can be shown that improved site circulation is necessary and that the alterations will accomplish this without altering the integrity of the structure.*

The site plan illustrates that the walkway to the historic structure would change from being located at the side of the porch to the center of the porch. As this would modify access to the building, research should be done to determine if the porch may have had a center entry at one point. Placement of the front door on the center of the façade and the original Greek Revival style suggest that the original access may have been centered. However, as the current access is

clearly from the side of the porch, one solution would be to add the center access yet maintain the side access.

The addition of parking for 22 vehicles and the amount of space devoted to vehicular movement would significantly alter the circulation of the site. Staff recommends significantly reducing or even eliminating the surface parking as well as to remove one of two driveways in an effort to maintain as much existing open space on-site as possible. While any changes to the site will likely negatively affect the integrity of the site, and therefore the historic structure, reducing the on-site parking and hardscape minimizes the reduced integrity of the site and structure.

### **I. Removal of Later Additions and Alterations**

*Each property will be separately studied to determine if later additions and alterations can, or should be removed*

The enclosure of the front porch is a later addition that is not stylistically appropriate to the structure and should be reversed, as should removal of the fire escape.

*In the case of new construction or additions to existing buildings or structures, the Commission shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the building or structure both in relation to the land area upon which the building or structure is situated and to buildings and structures in the vicinity, and the Commission may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and set back requirements in addition to those required by applicable ordinance or by-law.*

*The Commission shall not make any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of preventing developments incongruous to the historic aspects or the architectural characteristics of the surroundings and of the historic district.*



*GIS map illustrating the Aldersey-Summit Local Historic District in light blue. Other nearby historic districts are noted in other colors.*

The Aldersey-Summit Local Historic District is illustrated in the map above. This district is contiguous and composed of buildings located either on Aldersey Street or Summit Avenue.

- *Does the proposal coincide with the appropriate Guidelines for Additions and Infill Construction?*

**A. Size, Shape and Proportion**

*New building facades should be designed to look appropriate to, and compatible with, adjacent buildings. If there are no immediately adjacent structures, the applicant should look to nearby structures and blocks.*

*Building height should be similar to nearby buildings, respecting the predominant heights of existing houses or commercial structures.*

The height of the proposed structures does not exceed the height of the historic structure. However, the intensity of the development that is proposed largely overshadows the historic building due to the location of the structures 15 feet off the street, which obstructs views of the historic structure, a new footprint that more than doubles in size, and nearly a 70% increase in the total gross square feet. These buildings will extend deep into the lot and eliminate the green open space that is the only remaining component that identifies this parcel as once part of a farmstead. Typically, buildings would step down as they progress toward the rear of the lot as well as become slightly reduced in massing; the proposed buildings step up slightly in height and do not reduce their massing, which serves to enclose the historic structure and thereby reduces the historic integrity.

*Facade proportions (ratio of width to height) should be similar to those of surrounding buildings to create or complement streetscapes and views with the area.*

The fenestration patterns and proportions proposed, as well as detailing, have been selected in an effort to be compatible with and contextual to the Aldersey streetscape. The proposed buildings are 2½ stories in height and have three- and four-bay wide façades, which are consistent with surrounding structures.

*Roof forms should follow predominant styles of adjacent buildings.*

The roof forms proposed have been selected by the design team in an effort to be compatible with and contextual to the Aldersey streetscape. These forms are illustrated within other structures along Aldersey Street.

*Utility connections should be placed to minimize visibility from the street.*

Utilities are proposed to be removed from overhead and placed underground.

**B. Materials**

*Materials should be compatible with those used in adjacent structures or, when there are no immediately adjacent structures, buildings within the surrounding area. Exterior surfaces should be painted or otherwise finished in a similarly compatible manner.*



**Building A** proposes a 2½ story, Second Empire style dwelling, which is consistent with the surrounding neighborhood. Materials include synthetic slate shingles and copper flashing on the Mansard roof; the front porch would also have synthetic slate shingles along with crown molding, brackets, and dentils; and the entry door would have sidelights. Windows would be two-over-two with style appropriate headers, sills and casings. Siding materials would be clapboards with corner details of fluted trim boards and the cornice would have period brackets over fascia boards.

**Building C** proposes a 2½ story, Queen Anne style dwelling, which is also consistent with the surrounding neighborhood. Materials include a period appropriate glass and panel door framed with fluted jambs and molding; windows would be two-over-one with style appropriate headers, sills and casings; and siding materials would be clapboards with corner trim board, brackets and wood shingle detailing in each gable end.

While the design has selected details that identify each building individually, Staff recommends that these materials be solid, front to back.

*Materials of foundation walls should be compatible with those of nearby buildings. If use of matching materials is impractical, substitutions that are not obtrusive should be used.*

While this detail has not been noted in the plans submitted, as the structures proposed are new buildings, Staff recognizes the foundations will likely be constructed of poured concrete, which will help identify these buildings as new construction.

### **C. Details**

*Door and window height-to width ratios should be similar to those in neighboring structures. The pattern established by the relationship of window or door openings and the surrounding wall area should respect the neighboring structures. The percentage of glass to wall should approximate that of neighboring structures.*

The height to width ratio appears consistent with those of nearby structures. Each façade has a general rhythm that can be easily understood and is maintained throughout the building. There are some portions of the side façades that do illustrate paired windows or doors, but as these façades are expansive, include significant garage entrances, and extend to the rear of the parcel, these paired windows or doors are not prominent features. While the solid to void ratio is similar to that of nearby dwellings, the effect is less because the sheer size of the proposal is not respectful to neighbors within the local historic district. Increasing the setback, reducing the footprint, and stepping down the rear massing of each new structure would be more compatible with the district and retain the integrity of the parcel and the historic structure.

*Facade elements which can help give a new structure a historical appearance include window hoods and lintels; entrances with porches and balustrades; cornice lines with architectural detailing; brick work with quoins and corbels; friezes; gables; columns and pilasters; and chimneys.*

*Any such detail elements must be consistent with the design of the structure. Adding details typical of one historic period may be inconsistent with a structure typical of the style of another period.*

The proposal includes a number of elements listed above such as window hoods and sills, entrances with porches and balustrades, cornice lines with architectural detailing, and gables. The architectural detail of each structure is consistent with the overall style of the buildings.

#### 4. *Precedence:*

- The HPC has approved the replacement of inappropriate railings with a period appropriate railing and balusters on several occasions. The removal of a fire escape is not a common request but would likely be approved at the Staff level. These are common requests that have been approved in similar cases.
- The HPC does not often review proposals to construct new structures in designated districts. But, in 2012, the HPC approved the construction of a free-standing two-unit dwelling behind the existing historic structure at 11 Linden Avenue. Conditions specified the general location and footprint, design to resemble a barn/stable, and elevations illustrating massing, scale, height, roof form, fenestration pattern, and trim/door details. The footprint, as approved by ZBA, was approximately 1,500 square feet and located at the rear of the parcel. See table below.

In 2010, the HPC approved the construction of a new addition and landscape per plans and elevations dated 9/3/2010 for 23 Porter Street. The new footprint approved was approximately 1,500 square feet and located at the rear of the parcel. See table below.

Property	Lot Size	Footprint Pre-Construction	Footprint Post-Construction	Gross SF Pre-Construction	Gross SF Post-Construction	Principle Structure Setback	Front Yard Setback
11 Linden Ave	12,480	2,616	4,101	3,267	6,267	19.2'	115'
23 Porter St	13,630	1,529	3,292	3,000	6,292	18'	95'
9-11 Aldersey St	25,000	1,453	7,619	3,959	21,122	43'	15'

Property	Original Footprint/Lot Size	Post-Construction Footprint/Lot Size	Original Gross SF/Lot Size	Post-Construction Gross SF/Lot Size	Total Gross SF within Historic Structure
11 Linden Ave	21%	33%	.26	.50	52%
23 Porter St	11%	24%	.22	.46	48%
9-11 Aldersey St	6%	30%	.16	.84	19%

The previously approved projects at Linden Avenue and Porter Street have set a precedent for infill development on parcels designated as a local historic district. In both cases, the new development is significantly setback both from the street and the existing historic structure, is approximately a 10% increase in the size of the footprint on the lot and increases the total gross square feet by approximately 50%. While the subject parcel is significantly larger than the parcel where infill development has been previously approved by the HPC, the proposed buildings would be located significantly closer to the street than the existing historic structure, increase the footprint by 25%, and the total gross square feet would be increased by almost 70%. In addition, the previously approved infill developments are considered to contribute to the integrity of the single-building local historic districts as the location, scale, and massing are consistent with the HPC guidelines and do not encroach within the sightline along the streetscape. Derived from the tables listed above, appropriate new infill development for this parcel would be setback approximately 70' from the

street, have an increased footprint of approximately 1,500 square feet, and have no more than 8,000 total gross square feet of area.

The overarching concern about the subject proposal, which differentiates this project from the previously approved infill projects, is the resulting overall intensity of the development. While current City zoning allows dimensional requirements to be maximized, these dimensions are not subject to the development standards typical of a local historic district. The proposal significantly reduces, if not eliminates, the remaining integrity of the lot by eliminating a vast majority of the surrounding green open space, which is the only component of the original historic context that remains. The proposal also significantly reduces the integrity of the historic structure due to the location, scale and large massing of the proposed development. The intensity of the development that is proposed largely overshadows the historic building due to the location of the structures which obstructs views of the historic structure, a new footprint that more than doubles in size, and nearly a 70% increase in the total gross square feet which thereby obscures the historic structure.

### **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 a portion of the project for which an application for a Historic Certificate has been filed is appropriate for and compatible with the preservation and protection of the Aldersey-Summit Local Historic District. Therefore, Staff recommends the Historic Preservation Commission grant Gerard Meehan, Trustee for G&T Realty Trust, a Certificate of Appropriateness to remove the existing clapboard porch rail and fire escape and to replace the railing with a style appropriate railing and balusters.

Staff determines that a portion of the project for which an application for a Historic Certificate has been filed is not appropriate for, nor compatible with the preservation and protection of the Aldersey-Summit Local Historic District. The proposed new structures would severely diminish the quality of the setting in which the historic Vinal house has been located since it was built, and therefore the new structures are fundamentally incompatible with the Aldersey-Summit Local Historical District. Therefore, Staff recommends the Historic Preservation Commission deny Gerard Meehan, Trustee for G&T Realty Trust, a Certificate of Appropriateness to construct two additional residential structures at 9-11 Aldersey Street.