



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): 53 Atherton Street Central-Atherton-Spring-Summer Local Historic District  
1850 Artemas Rogers House Spring Hill National Register District  
Case: HPC 2013.027

Applicant Name: Janet Moonan  
Applicant Address: 53 Atherton Street, Somerville

Date of Application: May 30, 2013  
Legal Notice: *Replace concrete posts with granite; replace retaining walls with unit blocks and granite tops; lengthen and widen driveway; and install privacy fence.*

Staff Recommendation: Certificate of Appropriateness  
Date of Public Hearing: June 18, 2013

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**I. Building Description**

*Architectural Description:* 2-1/2 story side entry Greek Revival with a later wrap-around porch on good condition. The front yard and driveway are demarcated by concrete retaining walls and posts. The driveway consists of two ca.1920s narrow pads that extend one car length into the yard.

*Historical Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:* Key component in historic streetscape of primarily mid-nineteenth century Greek Revival and Italianate houses. The house next door to the west is a 1910s Craftsman style two-family. The house is bordered on three sides by yards, including narrow front and east yards that exhibit gardens, while a tree-shaded back yard is located behind the building.



Situated within a streetscape of primarily mid-nineteenth century single and two-family homes, 53 Atherton Street's main and east facades overlook narrow yards containing gardens. The front yard is enclosed by a low retaining wall — both the wall and its low posts are composed of stucco-parged brick. The east yard's driveway is short in length.

## II. Project Description

### *Proposal of Alteration:*

1. Proposed work includes the replacement of existing concrete block retaining wall in front of house and along side of house for the length of the driveway with unit block walls and a granite topper.
2. The existing driveway is proposed to be lengthened to allow parking of a second car to serve the two-family residence, and widened slightly to allow cars to fit into driveway with enough space for entrance and exit to vehicle. Driveway is proposed for replacement with permeable pavers to manage runoff.
3. The installation of a 6' tall wooden privacy fence (approx. 1 or 1.5 feet of top is composed of lattice, allowing some visibility through top) in the Rockport design by Carli Fence around rear of property (back yard).

## III. Findings for a Certificate of Appropriateness

### 1. *Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:*

This is the first time an owner of this property has requested an alteration or repair to the building since it was designated as a Local Historic District in January 2010.

### 2. *Precedence:*

The city has changed greatly since this house was constructed. Other than the use of retaining walls to contain the earth and to level gardens, the now ubiquitous automotive uses were non-existent. Instead there were drives leading to barns, stables and carriage houses. Fences were frequent boundaries to keep animals from the front yards, fields and gardens and to contain them on the property. They were not used to provide privacy.

1. The Commission has granted Certificates of Appropriateness to install unit block retaining walls were approved for 85 Benton Road, 27 and 73 Columbus Avenue, and 156 School Street.
2. There have been a few cases where the Commission has granted Certificates of Appropriateness to either widen or lengthen driveways at 85 Benton, 23 Chester, 27 Columbus, and 9 Westwood.
3. Privacy fences have been approved for Certificates of Appropriateness at the rear and extending to the edge of bays or ells at 438 Broadway, 23 Chester Street, 58, 61, and 63 Columbus Avenue, and 45 Vinal Avenue. This does not make the property any less important and perhaps renders what is visible more important to the streetscape.

### 4. *Considerations:*

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?* All the proposed alterations are visible from the public rights-of-way of Atherton Street or Harvard Street.
- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?*

1. The existing concrete block retaining wall is leaning toward the driveway, crumbling and has become unsafe, and is proposed to be replaced with granite pillars and a paver-type retaining wall, with granite capping.
2. The existing driveway is very short and stops at the edge of the house. It is composed two concrete slabs, typical of the 1920s.
3. The fence is chain link. Some of the yard is edged with shrubs but not at the rear of the property which totally visible from Harvard Street

*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?*

*D. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.*

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

HPC Guidelines for landscaping which includes paths and driveways state:

**Landscape Features and Paving**

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

The major changes proposed are to the dimensions of the driveway, the materials of the retaining walls and the driveway. The existing character of the street is primarily that of an 1850-1920 suburb with a few incursions of various automotive related buildings and paving.

Generally speaking the current HPC Guidelines do not address fences or walls per se. However, it is clear that the Guidelines recommend that historic buildings not be obscured by changes in the landscape. "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." The Guidelines further state that "The general intent of this section is to preserve the existing or later essential landscape features that enhance the property." Fences "...can be seen as a transition feature between the structure and its ... surroundings."

2. *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.*

Cars have taken over as the major means of transportation since this neighborhood was built. Spring Hill is residential in character than nearby Somerville Avenue due to the mature trees and well-kept gardens. The current parking area may have been sufficient for a Model T but the owner finds it undersized and would like to get the cars off the street and further away from the curb.

3. *The existing landforms of the site should not be altered unless shown to be necessary for maintenance of the structure or site. Additional landforms will only be considered if they will not obscure the exterior of the structure.*

Alterations of the landform will be by a proximately a foot on one side of the driveway next to the house to allow passengers and drivers to open the door without smashing it against a wall and lengthen the driveway sufficiently to allow cars to pull beyond the front edge of the house.

4. *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 layout of the front walkway will not be altered. There will be no other grade changes proposed beyond those need to extend and widen the driveway. The materials will be changed from poured concrete to molded concrete blocks and granite posts and wall toppers. See photos.

The Applicant's proposal for a unit block paved parking area will fit in with the neighborhood and not detract significantly from the street. The removal of the concrete wall and the concrete pads, which probably date from the 1950's or 1960's, would have no effect on the visibility or the layout. The installation of the pavers and retaining wall would clearly be modern.

### 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 for a Historic Certificate has been filed is appropriate for and compatible with the preservation and protection of the Central Atherton Spring Summer Local Historic District; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant Janet Moonan a Certificate of Appropriateness to widen and lengthen the driveway; remove the concrete pillars and retaining walls; replace them with granite pillars, unit block retain walls as depicted and granite toppers; and remove the concrete parking pads and replace them with unit block pavers as shown in the attached photographs.**



Green = the recently designated Central Atherton Spring LHD

Blue = the older individually designated LHDs and the Chestnut Court LHD

Pink = Westwood Road LHD

Existing  
conditions  
June 2013





Photos of Proposed Materials for Retaining Wall and Driveway Reconstruction  
53 Atherton Street, Somerville, MA

