



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:	53 Columbus Avenue	c.1874 Second Empire House
Case:	HPC 2015.008	Columbus Ave. / Warren Ave. Local Historic District
Applicant Name:	RCG Columbus Renewal LLC, Owner	
Applicant Address:	17 Ivaloo Street, Somerville, MA 02143	
Date of Application:	February 25, 2015	
Legal Notice:	<i>Alter rear ell and windows.</i>	
Staff Recommendation:	Certificate of Appropriateness	
Date of Public Hearing:	March 17, 2015	

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**I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION**

**ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:** From the Form B

*One of the most popular building styles in the Prospect Hill area during the 1870s and early 1880s was the Second Empire style for large center-hall or side-hall entrance dwellings. The concave Mansard roof retains its decorative hexagonal slates. There are two segmental arched dormers on each side exposed to the corner intersection.*

*In spite of the asbestos shingled siding the house retains some of its Second Empire characteristics including its most distinctive feature of a decorative slate roof, paired cornice brackets, a two-story octagonal side bay and squared porch columns with capitals and brackets with drop finials.*



**53 Columbus Avenue 2014**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT/EVOLUTION OF STRUCTURE OR PARCEL:** From the Form B

*Prospect Hill, one of the most substantial residential neighborhoods of Somerville, evolved throughout the late 19th century. Prior to that, it was an agricultural community of farms. Columbus Avenue, once known as Warren Avenue, ran from Walnut to Bonner Street until the 1870s when it was continued through Bonner property to Washington Street. Its proximity to Union Square, a center for commercial and transportation activity made it a desirable place to live. Columbus Avenue was and is half way to the top of Prospect Hill and only a few blocks from Highland Avenue where the civic center of Somerville was by the mid to late 1800s.*

*From 187,5 Henry M. Abbott lived in this house. According to City Directories he was a "house-builder" and in all likelihood built his own dwelling. The late 19th century owner/occupant was John W. Vinal who lived here from 1887. He was a real estate and insurance agent in Union Square.*

## II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### 1. *Proposal of Alteration:*

1. Remove and rebuild the existing third floor continuing the eave line and with a Mansard roof to meet the existing wall line on the rear ell; and
2. Replace four altered second floor windows visible on the rear and ell near Prospect Hill Parkway to match the original openings

The current owners are renovating the building and modernizing the units. The third floor unit needs the most work. The ceiling is low on the rear ell and connects with the enclosed rear egress.

According to the Applicants, “the proposed demolition will include the removal of the enclosure that connects the main body of the house to the rear stairwell and the removal of the second story hipped-roof above a portion of the rear ell; the rear egress stairwell shall remain. The proposed third floor addition will extend up from the existing second floor walls and continue the Mansard roof lines from the main roof along the east side and rear of the ell where it will meet the existing rear stairwell structure. Arched window dormers in the new Mansard roof will be constructed to match the arched dormers in the existing main roof. Along the west side of the rear ell the proposed third floor addition will extend up from the existing second floor walls, eliminating the existing remnant of the second floor eave and gutter configuration, and continuing in the same wall plane, to the height of the upper roof, allowing the wall and roof to meet up with the existing egress rear stairwell structure. Windows in the third floor addition west elevation will be installed in the wall plane with the same detailing as typical window existing windows. At the height of the upper roof a gutter will be introduced on the west elevation. On the third floor addition we propose to match the existing siding with cementitious shingles to visually match the existing, and match in-kind the windows, the gutters and the exterior trim materials. At the upper roof we propose to use asphalt shingles to match the existing asphalt shingle on the main body of the roof. At the Mansard roof we propose to use asphalt Slateline Shingles manufactured by GAF.”

On the second floor they propose to replace four disproportionate existing windows, one on the rear elevation of the main building, one on the east elevation of the rear ell, two on the west elevation of the ell, with windows that are sized proportionally to match the typical existing windows in the building. These windows would be white vinyl to match the existing.

See the final pages for photos, photo shop images, and material specification information.

## II. FINDINGS

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

C/NA	Alex Dimille	1994.039	1. Rebuild front porch.
C/NA	Marie Miele	2006.070	1. Repair and replace vinyl windows in-kind.
C/A	RCG Columbus Renewal LLC	2014.055	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The two chimneys may be demolished ;</li> <li>2. Prior to demolition of the chimneys, the Applicant shall receive approval from the HPC with regard to the replacement/faux chimneys, which will have the same dimensions, a simple design, and the same location on the roof; and</li> <li>3. The details of the replacement/faux chimneys shall be identified on a plan to be approved at a future date by the HPC.</li> </ol>

*Precedence:*

- *Are there similar properties / proposals?*

There are no exact precedents. In 2003, the Commission granted a Certificate of Appropriateness to reconstruct the missing Mansard roof on the Bow Street Police Station using a slightly different color brick and synthetic slate shingles along with several modern details to distinguish the old from the new. In 2005, the Commission granted a Certificate of Appropriateness to add to and alter the rear ell of 55 Columbus Avenue which is also a Second Empire style building to allow for the installation of a hydraulic elevator and egress stairs. In this case, the addition was for a modern approach, utterly distinct from the historic fabric using related materials to unify the forms.

Comparing the proposed alteration with existing Second Empire homes in the neighborhood finds that several have L-shaped Mansards and some have flat roofed additions. The Mansard ells are continuations on the same floor with the same eave and roof line while flat roof additions terminate on the floor below and the eave is set lower.

There are several buildings in the Columbus Avenue Warren Avenue Local Historic District with Mansard ells that continue the roof line. These are 56, 61 and 71 Columbus Avenue, and 26, 27, 29 and 31 Warren Avenue. In other cases, the rear ell terminates with a flat roof of the second floor on the ell just below the Mansard eave. As noted above, the ell on 55 Columbus Avenue was altered extensively to allow for ADA access and a second means of egress from the third floor.

*Considerations:*

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

The roof is visible from Columbus Avenue, Prospect Hill Parkway and Prospect Hill Park.

The windows are visible from Columbus Avenue, Prospect Hill Parkway and Prospect Hill Park.

- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?*

The previous owners of the building which was designated as a Local Historic District in 1989, did no work done beyond the porch repair in 1994, and the replacement of vinyl windows in 2006. The Building Permit record is a little unclear about alterations to the building although it appears that the rear stairway and second floor porch on the main facade was constructed in 1925 by J. Kelley.

The building is a Second Empire located at the corner of the Prospect Hill Parkway and Columbus Avenue. The rear ell has a small secondary third floor addition leading to covered egress stairs adjacent to Prospect Hill Park. The addition is set back from the rear ell to the width of the egress stairs. It cuts into one of the dormer windows and has 4 small vinyl windows. The siding on the addition is 3 tab asphalt roofing shingles. The roof line is about 6 inches lower than the break on the Mansard roof. It may have been added to the building in 1945 when the stairs were added. The building has asbestos cementitious shingled siding on most of its body.

The windows on the second floor rear and side have been altered. They are both shorter and wider than traditional windows. The third floor windows are considerably smaller.

- *Is the proposal more appropriate than the existing conditions?*

The proposal will continue the ell upward to meet the eave line of the Mansard roof and then replicate the roof on two sides with arched dormer windows to match the existing on the sides

visible from Prospect Hill Parkway excluding the egress stair tower. The roofing material will be Slateline architectural shingles in a color close to that of the existing slate roof.

The lower eave line of the Mansard would be continued on the opposite side of the house. The roof would be a shallow gable. The siding will be cementitious shingles that would blend with the existing asbestos shingles.

The proposed window and dormers would match the existing historic openings and casings. The sash would be white vinyl to match the existing.

This proposed change is more consistent with historic practice as noted in the precedence above and would be less of a jury-rigged addition with a more solid appearance.

- *Is the proposal more in-keeping with the age, purpose, style and construction of the building?*

The proposal is in-keeping with the style, residential character and construction of the building through the replacement of inappropriate connections to the building, inappropriate windows, and replication of important character defining features such as the dormers, and through the use of modern materials distinctly different from those on the original portion of the building.

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

## **GENERAL APPROACH**

*The primary purpose of Somerville's Preservation Ordinance is to encourage preservation and high design standards in Somerville's Historic Districts, in order to safeguard the City's architectural heritage. The following guidelines 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.*

- 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.*

Neither the third floor addition nor the altered windows are mentioned in the Form B.

- C. *Whenever possible, deteriorated material or architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.*

The proposal removes an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century addition and replaces it with a facsimile of the Mansard roof and regularizes the window openings and style.

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

The proposed alterations are based upon existing 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.*

The proposed roofing material contrasts with the existing slate. The windows would be replaced to match the existing. Cementitious shingles will be replaced where necessary with ones not containing asbestos.

- 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.*

The proposed alterations are visible from Columbus Avenue, Prospect Hill Parkway and Prospect Hill Park.

*Exterior Walls:*

1. *Wood Siding: clapboards, shingles, board and batten, etc.*
  - a. *Retain and repair original or later important material whenever possible.*
  - b. *Retain and repair, when necessary, replace deteriorated material which matches as closely as possible.*

Most of the original siding is beneath cementitious (probably asbestos) shingles. New materials will replicate the look of the old shingles, not the historic fabric beneath.

*Roofs:*

1. *Preserve the integrity of the original or later important roof shape.*

There will be no alteration of the original Mansard roof shape however some of it will be lost due to the expanded the third floor addition on the ell incorporating part of it. The ell addition will be altered to match the original roof height, eaves and form.

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.*

There will be no change to the slate roof. The new roof will have a 3-tab Slateline architectural shingle that does not mimic slate but can be found in similar color palette.

3. *Whenever possible, replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail.*

There will be no alteration in the roof original roof covering. Slates salvaged from the section that would be removed for the larger third floor addition will be used to make repairs to the original slate roof.

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.*

No original architectural details will be removed beyond those necessary to enlarge the ell addition. Architectural details such as the eave trim and break details found on the original roof will be replicated on the ell addition including the dormers.

*Windows and Doors:*

1. *Retain original and later important door and window openings where they exist. Do not enlarge or reduce door and window openings for the purpose of fitting stock window sash or doors, or air conditioners.*

Window openings will be replicated and reinstated where they do not match the historic openings on the second floor. Window surrounds in the Mansard will also match the historic ones.

2. *Whenever possible, repair and retain original or later important window elements such as sash, lintels, sill, architraves, glass, shutters and other decorative elements and hardware. When replacement of materials or elements is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence. If aluminum windows must be installed, select a baked finish that matches as closely as possible the color of the existing trim. Investigate weather-stripping and storm windows with a baked enamel finish as an alternative to the replacement of historic sash.*

Important window elements such as the casings and dormers will be reproduced in-kind. The existing windows are all white vinyl and were replaced in 2006. These will probably last another 5-8 years. The proposed dormer windows and new window openings would match the existing.

Taking into consideration The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation :

*9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*

The new third floor addition will be differentiated from the old by the use of modern materials, but will retain the massing, size, scale and architectural features of the original Mansard. It would be similar to several other buildings in the neighborhood in roof shape.

*10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.*

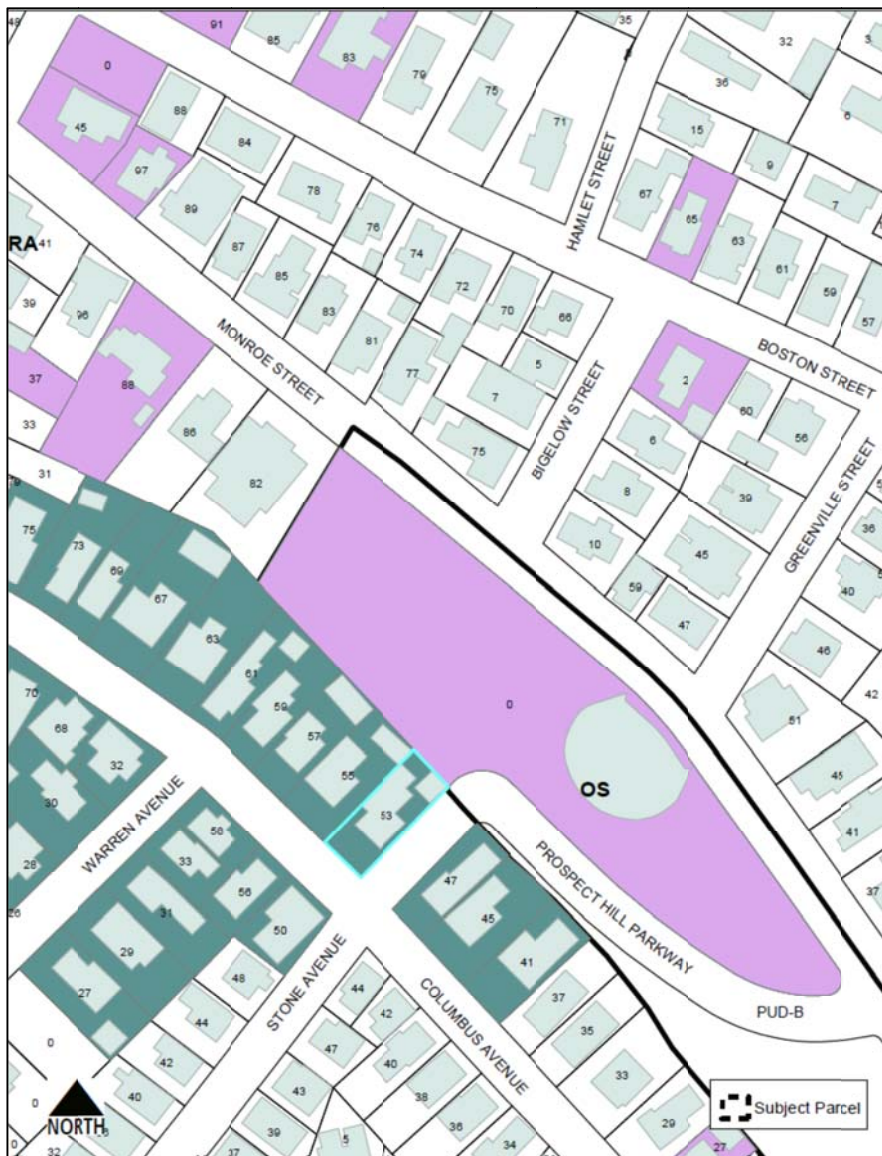
The new third floor could be removed without damaging what is left of the original Mansard roof.

### 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 determined 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 Columbus Avenue /Warren Avenue Local Historic District; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant RCG Columbus Renewal LLC, Owner a Certificate of Appropriateness** to alter the rear ell and windows on 53 Columbus Avenue as per designs submitted.

1. The roof shall follow the same eave line and roof break.
2. The planes of the roof shall be the match the curvature of the existing.
3. The eave details and break in the Mansard shall match the existing in design, material, and proportions
4. The dormers shall match the existing in design, material, and placement
5. The window casings should match the originals in size, shape, form and design.
6. The window openings shall match the original openings found on the front and sides of the building.
7. The window sash shall match the existing in form and style.
8. The siding on the walls shall be cementitious shingles to match the existing in size, shape, texture and color.







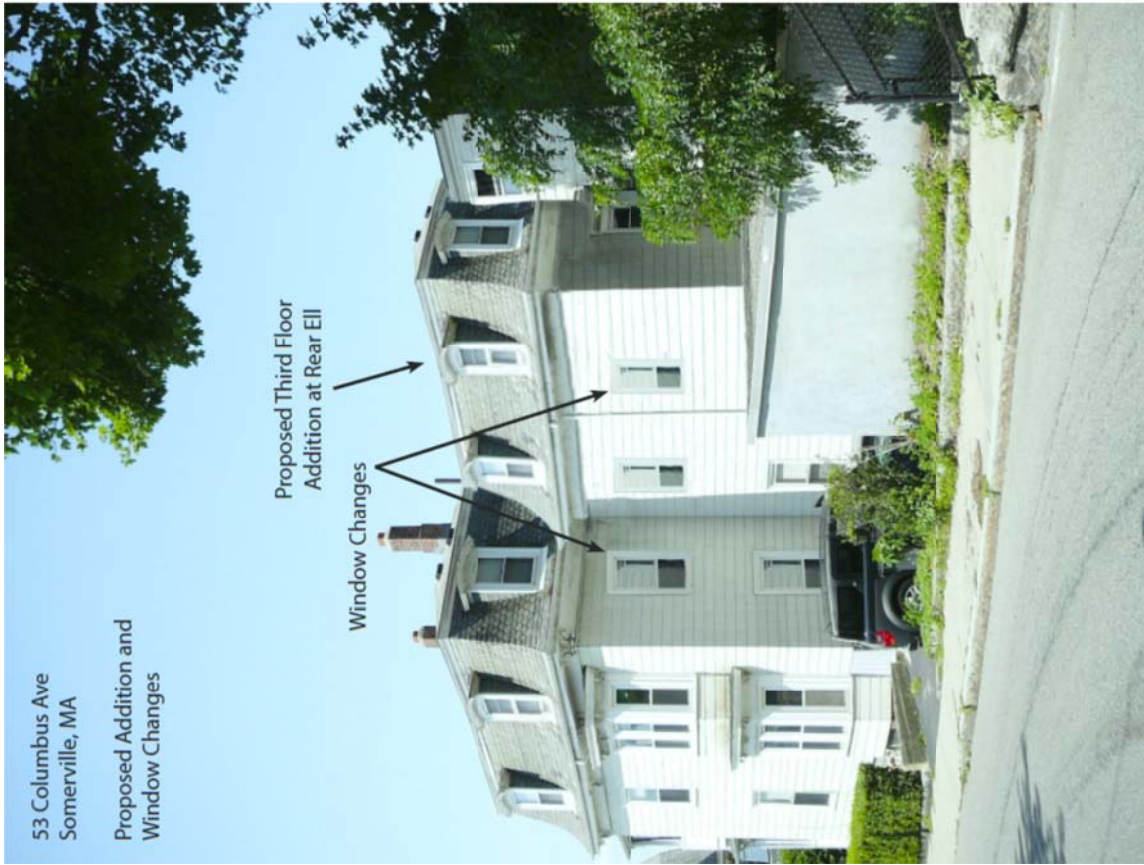
*53 Columbus Avenue rear 3-25-2015*





*53 Columbus Avenue as found on Google earth - note the range of Mansard roof configurations on Columbus Avenue and Warren Avenue.*

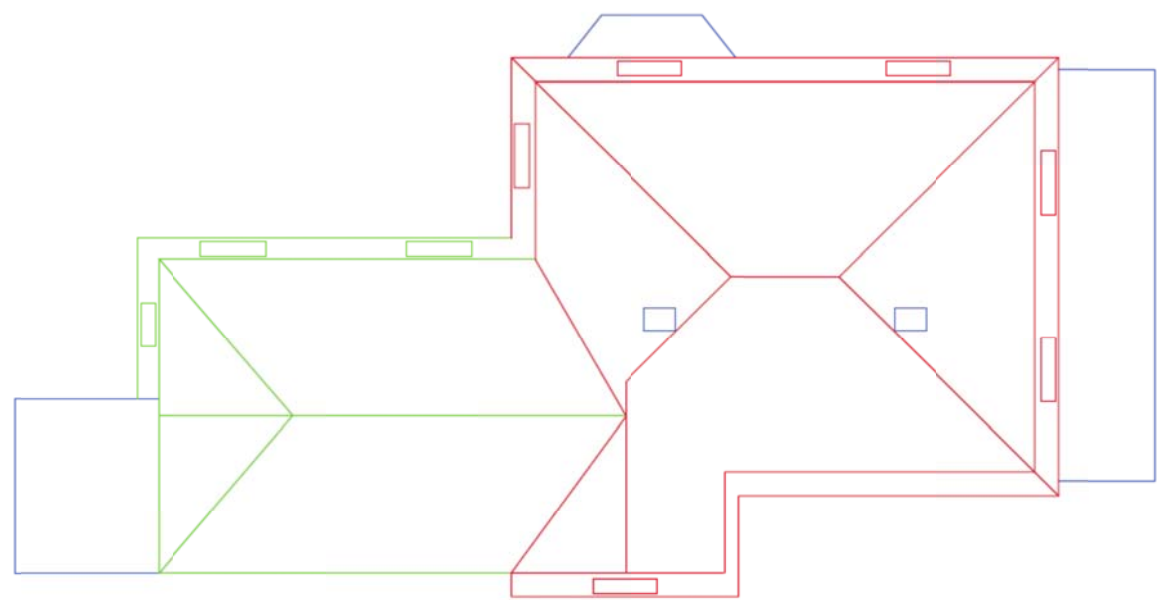






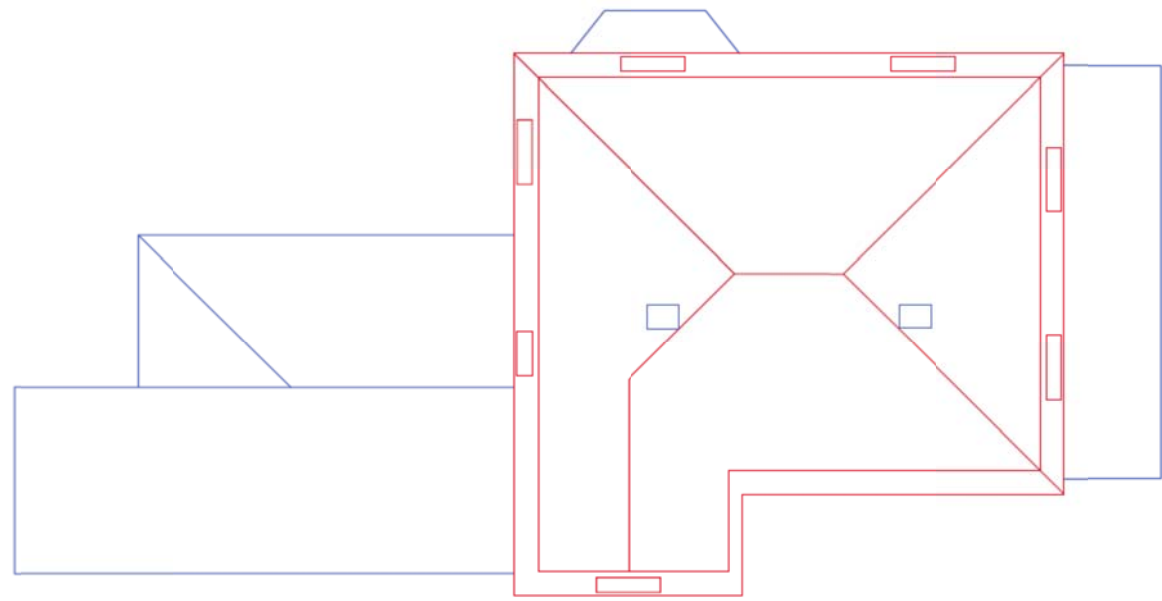






53 Columbus Ave  
Somerville, MA  
Proposed Roof Plan

Proposed Third Floor  
Roof Alterations  
↑



53 Columbus Ave  
Somerville, MA  
Existing Roof Plan