



ember 18, 2012
: HPC 2012.117
arage and fence

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) 57 Columbus Avenue, William Canavan House (garage and fence), Columbus Avenue -
Warren Avenue LHD
Case: 2012.117

Applicant Name: Monique Cole and Dr. David Bell
Applicant Address: 57 Columbus Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143

Date of Application: 10/26/12
Legal Notice: 11/2/12 and 11/30/12

Staff Recommendation: Certificate of Appropriateness
Date of Public Hearing: 12/18/12

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

1. Architectural Description:

This circa 1877 Italianate was built at the same time as its neighbor, #59 Columbus by the same real estate investor, this two and one-half story Italianate house retains its wide eave overhang and returns, brackets and dentil cornice, and the two and one-story bays. Asbestos shingles have slightly altered the visual impact of this property.

There is a low four bay garage at the rear of the property constructed in 1925 in the most basic auto shed style of cement blocks in the shape of rusticated granite. It is located as far from the house as possible on the lot. The doors are not original to the garage.



57 Columbus Avenue Garage

2. Historical Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:

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.

This property was part of a larger parcel of over 12,000 square feet, part of Lot 12 and Lot #13 of Ira Hill's 1870 Plan (Plan Book 17, Plan 90). In 1877 the land parcel passed from Josiah Q. Twombly to William Canavan, who built two houses, #57 and #59 Columbus Avenue. They were built on speculation and sold within the year. This property sold to another investor Mary E. Hawkins and in 1879 William C. High purchased this property also. He had bought #59 Columbus directly from Canavan in 1877. A late 19th century resident, Belvin Williston was a draughtsman and designer.

The garage was constructed more than 50 years after the house when modes of transportation had drastically changed from horses and streetcars to personal automobiles.

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Proposal of Alteration:

The garage is in poor condition and is too low for modern vans and SUVs. The Applicant's would like to rebuild it as a taller structure with similar doors.

The current fences are ugly and in poor condition.

III. FINDINGS FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

1. Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:

No work has been done to this garage since the installation of modern doors at an unknown date. The existing fence was erected at an unknown date.

2. Precedence:

No proposals for the demolition of 1920s concrete block garages have been reviewed in the last 10 years. While typical of the 1920s when hundreds if not thousands of such buildings were constructed for Model Ts and other popularly available cars, the garage is not in the period of significance for Prospect Hill and the Warren/Columbus Avenue Historic District.

The type of fence proposed has been approved on a regular basis by the Commission. It is a popular style of privacy fence that blends well with historic architecture but is clearly not of an historic period. This fence has been used at 26 Bow Street, 58 Columbus Avenue, 61 Columbus Avenue, 63 Columbus Avenue, 45 Vinal Avenue, 9 Westwood Road and 16-18 Westwood Road.

3. Considerations:

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

Two bays of the garage are visible from Columbus Avenue at the end of the driveway. The roof of the garage and the fence are visible during the winter and early spring from Prospect Hill Park.

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

The Columbus Avenue/Warren Avenue Local Historic District is one of the most prominent. Many of the houses on the street have been renovated although there are still several houses in need of repairs and maintenance. A few houses have stables and carriage houses attached but most have neither garage nor stable. Four of the houses in this section of Columbus have concrete block garages constructed in the 1920s. The garage at 57 Columbus Avenue is reported to be in poor condition.

- *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. In general, this tends to minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.*

Neither the garage nor the fence is included in the survey form.

- 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).*

The garage is typical but less ornamented than many garages of the 1920s. See **Carriage House to Auto House** by Reed and Hardwicke for a typology of popular styles. It is significant as a characteristic structure of the vintage automotive era when the Model T and Model A Fords were the car of choice for many.

Garage



The fence is not typical of the 19th century and does not compliment the building.

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.



The applicants intend to rebuild a very similar garage only taller with doors that are similar to the modern ones currently in place and similar to those approved for 55 Columbus Avenue.

The fence is not original to the property.

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 new building will be very similar to the existing building, being constructed with cement blocks and with similar doors.

The fence will be wood.

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.

This building and fence is visible from Prospect Hill Park from above and the garage from Columbus Avenue.

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

The building meets the following Guidelines.

H. 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.*

There will be no alteration of the landscape.

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.*
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.*
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.*

There will be no alteration of the driveway. The garage will be taller but will not significantly alter the existing site. The fence will not directly attach to the building, and will not hide any part of the building visible from the public right of way.

I. Removal of Later Additions and Alterations

1. *Each property will be separately studied to determine if later additions and alterations can, or should be removed. It is not possible to provide a single general guideline.*
2. *Factors that will be considered include:*
 - a. *compatibility with the original property's integrity in scale, materials and character;*

The fence and garage can be removed without altering the integrity of the house.

- b. *historic association with the property; and*

Neither the fence nor garage are mentioned on the survey form were not considered to be part of the period of significance for the district.

- c. *quality in the design and execution of the addition.*

The design of the fence is more in keeping with the district, being similar in design to approved fences. The garage will not be significantly different from the existing, whether viewed from the street or from above in the park.

J. Demolition

1. *Demolition of part or all of a structure is considered to be an alteration to the exterior and is subject to the review of the Commission.*

The demolition of the garage and its reconstruction will not significantly alter the building or the district in a negative manner.

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 57 Columbus Avenue, the William Canavan House (garage and fence) in the Columbus Avenue - Warren Avenue Local Historic District; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant Monique Cole and Dr. David Bell a Certificate of Appropriateness** for the new fence and the demolition and reconstruction of the garage.

57 Columbus Avenue



BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

1. Atlas of Middlesex County, Somerville: 1874 ("J. Q. Twombly", land only), 1884 ("Wm. C. High"), 1895 ("Belvin Williston").
2. City Directories, 1870s-1890s.
3. Registry of Deeds, Middlesex County: Book 1440 Page 100; Book 1456,

Page 167; Book 1522, Page 75.