



**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) 57 Columbus Avenue, William Canavan House, Columbus Avenue/Warren Avenue LHD  
Case: 2012.118

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

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**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. The house has a standard side-hall entry plan with the stairs located on the western side. There is a low four bay garage at the rear of the property constructed in 1925.

*2. Historical Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:*



57 Columbus Avenue

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.

## II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### 1. *Proposal of Alteration:*

Staff has met with Applicants' architect on several occasions. They are renovating the interior. The current kitchen area has a mudroom on the rear constructed by enclosing the back porch. This portion of the structure has no footings. They plan to reconstruct the enclosed porch with a real foundation; install a bathroom; and relocate the door and windows on the rear; and shorten one window on the rear kitchen addition. Otherwise the form and massing would remain essentially the same. They would also like to replace all the windows with Pella Architect series aluminum clad 2/2 windows; with the exception of a decorative window on the second floor west side stairway.



Currently, there are 24 double-hung windows in the house at 57 Columbus Avenue. There are also two existing fixed sash windows at the rear porch and one casement window at the second floor bath.

Only four of the original double hung windows remain. Three of these original windows occur at the first floor bay window on the east elevation (driveway side). These three windows are currently painted shut and leak air in spite of storm windows. The side windows (18" wide) are 1/1 and the center window is 2/2. Here the sash are in relatively good condition and the windows could be restored with better stops, ropes, etc. and could function if provided with better storm windows.



The existing kitchen window on the west elevation is also original. This window is in poor condition with sash corners starting to separate and the window showing signs of several repairs over the years. They had intended to replace this window because of its condition and the desire to not have the window continue to extend below the kitchen counter on the inside. This is the one window they would like to shorten to provide for counters on the interior.

The 21 replacement windows have been installed in phases over several years. Several replacement window types have been used using combinations of vinyl, aluminum, and wood. None of these new wood replacement window sash appear to be from old growth lumber. All replacement window jambs have been installed within the frames of the original windows. The new side jambs do not always appear to have been insulated during installation and many jambs do not fit tightly against the sash. Many sash currently have added weather strip and taped seals along the joints. The south (street side) second floor bedroom is not used during winter because it just becomes too cold.



The two fixed windows at the existing porch appear to be made from used sash installed when the porch was enclosed. These are to be replaced with a single double hung window at the new ½ bath as part of the porch rebuild.

The casement window at the bath is shown to remain. They would also like to add a window to the west side stairs which would be leaded glass similar to stairhall windows that might have been added at a later 19<sup>th</sup> century date.

### III. FINDINGS FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

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

No work authorized by the Commission has been done to this house. A Building Permit given to J Plaza was found to strip the siding in 1973. Asbestos shingle siding was permitted until the late 1970s. No other building permits

were found for any alterations to the building over time.



The Applicants have installed a black replacement window on the kitchen window on the ground floor rear visible from the lower path in Prospect Hill Park. This is the prototype for all the proposed windows in the house.

## 2. *Precedence:*

Occasionally a portion of a building is so deteriorated that it is not possible to retain the historic fabric. The demolition and reconstruction of the enclosed porches/mudrooms has no particular precedent beyond the frequent reconstruction of porches due to rotting footings, and the carriage houses located at 73 Columbus Avenue and at 38 Meacham Road. There have been several instances of alterations of doors and windows in minimally visible locations. 77 Columbus Avenue had a basement window, minimally and obliquely visible from the public right of way enlarged as a second means of egress. Windows and doors were altered on the rear of 23 Pleasant Avenue that were minimally visible from either Vinal Avenue or Grand View Avenue. On 46 Bow Street, a window was moved and a new window was located to its right and constructed as a blind window, both minimally and obliquely visible from Bow Street.

The Commission generally does not allow replacement windows on the main façade of a building. Currently none of the windows on the main façade are original, so their replacement would not constitute a loss of historic fabric. There have been numerous cases where the owners have replaced replacement windows. Local addresses for such

replacement include 27 Columbus Avenue, 53 Columbus Avenue and 61 Columbus Avenue. A review of recently permitted windows show that several manufacturers have windows that been acceptable for the side and rear elevations when seen obliquely or at a distance providing that no low emissive or soft coat, vacuum coat or spatter coat or other low reflective coating is used such as 50 Bow Street and 396 Broadway. Certificates of Hardship were issued for 45 Columbus Avenue when the Applicant could not have been aware of the LHD designation due to a filing error at the Registry of Deeds and already had the windows in hand and 77 Columbus Avenue after the contractor, who had not pulled a building permit, had already junked the historic windows when the replacement was discovered.

### 3. *Considerations:*

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

The entire building is visible at some time of the year. The alteration to the rear enclosed porch/mudroom would be visible from the park during the winter months.

The new windows would be visible, more so because there would be no storm window protecting them. Storm windows are exempt from Commission review.

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

The Columbus Avenue/Warren Avenue Local Historic District is one of the most prominent districts in the City. Many of the houses on the street have been renovated although there are still several houses in need of repairs and maintenance. Most have clapboard but some have aluminum, vinyl, wood shingle and asbestos siding. This house is neither the worst nor the best in the district. Its asbestos shingles, circa 1973, are its greatest detractor. The existing windows are a mix of old and new types.

Decorative brackets on wide trim bands support roof overhangs at bay windows, porches, and along the main roof. The interiors still have large portions of the original decorative wood trim and detail throughout the interiors. Over the years some portions of the interiors have undergone renovations and maintenance has been deferred for several years. The traditional floor plans of a house of this vintage are also divided into a number of smaller rooms without closet or storage spaces. The proposed renovation project is intended to bring the house into the 21<sup>st</sup> century while restoring many of the original details and materials.

For example, we intend to reuse the existing paneled doors along with the thicker 5 ½" & 7" casings at the new doors and windows. New casings to match the existing will be made as required to complete the renovations.

The windows and storms do not seal well and the historic commission would like to see the existing windows be replaced with two over two double hung windows. The owners would like to continue with a black exterior window color in a permanent aluminum exterior finish and without storm windows. There is a replacement window by Pella on the rear kitchen wall that we understand is acceptable to both the owner and the historic commission. This window will be used for pricing window replacement

Many of the exterior walls of the house are un-insulated. These walls will be insulated as part of the renovation project. Exterior stud walls that are exposed during the renovations will be filled with the newer high R-Value batt insulation. Exterior walls with undisturbed good plaster will receive blown-in insulation from the inside.

There is no light on the interior stairs. HPC Staff have recommended that a leaded glass, inoperable window could provide light in a manner more in-keeping with a late nineteenth century residence than a small casement or double-hung window in that location.

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

Yes.

- 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.*

None of the features proposed for alteration are specifically discussed 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 street has become more auto-centric over the years but is essentially unchanged since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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

The rear porch needs to be totally rebuilt due to its condition. The windows as replacement windows are generally not repairable.

- 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 openings will not be altered on the main or side facades with the exception of a fixed decorative window on the stairs. Due to interior revisions, the applicants would like to relocate a door and some of the windows on the rear kitchen portion of the building. These would be visible during the winter months from Prospect Hill Park.

- 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 newly reconstructed enclosed area would match the existing in terms of materials, size and massing. The proposed new windows would be a black Pella® Architect Series® aluminum wood clad LX double-hung window as can be seen on the ground floor rear of the building. These would be in-keeping with the design, color and general visual qualities of the existing windows.

- 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.*

These alterations would be visible from the street and during the winter months from Prospect Hill Park.

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

On the whole the alterations proposed meet the Guidelines with alterations confined to the rear of the building or where they might logically have been.

**C. 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 visible from the street will stay the same with the exception of the shortened window in the west side kitchen area toward the rear and the new window on the stairway. No openings would be altered for the purpose of fitting stock window sash, doors or air conditioners.

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.*

The aluminum cladding will be dark as is appropriate for late nineteenth century windows.

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

1. *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. Avoid replacing wood posts and railings with metal ones, or wood porch decks with concrete.*

The form of the enclosed rear porch will be retained and not altered except for the placement and style of windows which will be more in-keeping with the rest of the windows on the house.



### 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, William Canavan House, 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.**



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.