



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:	58 Columbus Avenue	c.1874 Melville Parkhurst House
Case:	HPC 2014.035	Columbus Avenue/Warren Avenue LHD
Applicant Name:	William Gage, Owner	
Applicant Address:	58 Columbus Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143	
Date of Application:	May 7, 2014	
Legal Notice:	<i>Alteration to fence which includes a gate; and handrails on stairs.</i>	
Staff Recommendation:	Certificate of Appropriateness	
Date of Public Hearing:	June 18, 2014	

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: from the Form B

"The one and one-half story, Mansard cottage retains its original scalloped slate roof, the projecting bays that flank the center entrance, the side projecting bay with a five-sided pedimented dormer and other well detailed dormers. Alterations have been made by the addition of an oversized projecting square enclosed porch/dormer and the accompanying fire escape.

"The siting of this building is important for its visibility on the corner and its ability to tie the streetscapes together with the except for the oversized addition."



58 Columbus Avenue – Assessors Photo

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 halfway 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 owned by Silas and Emma Parker at the corner of Warren and Columbus. In 1875 the Plan of Silas Parker's Estate subdivided Lot 11 of Ira Hill's 1870 Plan for Building Lots. This became Lot 1 of the new subdivision. The date of construction has not been determined. According to City

Directories, by 1884 Melville Parkhurst, chief of police at the Bow Street station, lived in this house. The proximity to Union Square made this location desirable to tradesmen and officials alike."

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Proposal of Alteration:

1. Remove chain link fence on either side of the walkway;
2. Add a new iron gate in a design based upon the existing fire escape; and
3. Add handrail to west side of entry stairs.

See the final pages for details and photos.

II. FINDINGS

1. Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:

2005.031	William Gage	C/A	1. Replace a chain-link fence on southeast corner of the property with 5' "Concord" open top fence with pyramidal caps; and 2. Install a 3' wide gate.
2006.029	William Gage	C/NA	1. Repair and replace upper roof with three-tab shingles in-kind.
2011.030	William Gage	C/A	1. Install venting on east side of house for a new gas fireplace.
2012.035	William Gage	C/A	1. Remove concrete pad (C/A); 2. Replace with 11' x 13' red brick and 8' x 9' pea stone patios (C/A); and 3. Install a 6' x 10' fence to match existing on rear portion of side yard (C/A).

1. Precedence:

- *Are there similar properties / proposals?*

1. Remove chain link fence on either side of the walkway.

The Commission has granted Certificates of Appropriateness for the removal of chain link fencing to numerous properties: 26 Bow Street (2003), 56 Bow Street, (2012), 24 Chester Street (2009), 57 Meacham Road (2002); 140 Morrison Avenue (2003), 144 Morrison Avenue (2008), 74 Mount Vernon Street (2010), 28 Warren Avenue (2003), 6 Westwood Road (2008) and 9 Westwood Road (2011).

2. *Add a new iron gate at the beginning of the walkway in a design that relates to the fire escape.*
While there is much precedence for the addition of wood gates to wood fences, there was only one instance of a Certificate of Appropriateness issued for a metal gate. This was for an ornate iron gate at 27 Chester Street in 2011.

3. Add handrail to west side of entry stairs.

There are five instances where the Commission has granted Certificates of Appropriateness for the replacement of metal handrails with new wood handrails, balusters and newel posts: 57 Meacham Road (2002), 47 Mount Vernon Street (2013) 74 Mount Vernon Street (2002), 49 Vinal Avenue (2001) and 10 Westwood Road (2013); and one instance of totally new wood handrails at 14-16 Aldersey Street (2010). There was one case of metal pipe railings replaced with modern railings very similar to those proposed at 55 Columbus Avenue (2005). The metal railings at 18 Westwood Road (2013) were replaced in a different style.

3. Considerations:

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

All of the proposed changes would be visible from Columbus Avenue.

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

58 Columbus Avenue is prominently located on the corner of Warren and Columbus Avenues. A fire escape covered with wisteria cascades down the eastern side of the main façade. There is a chain link fence embedded in the shrubbery that separates the house from the public sidewalks. The chain link also extends up both sides of the walkway limiting access to the garden. There is no gate limiting access to the front porch or the gardens once the chain link fence is removed. While the *circa* 1985 photo shows a pipe railing, there are currently no hand rails on the steps. According to the Owner, these fell down and were not replaced. See photos at the end of the document.

- *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 effect 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.*

The chain link fence was not called out in the Form B; neither were stair rails mentioned.

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

Chain link fencing was first manufactured in the United States in the late 1890s, became popular in the 1950s and is not a later significant feature of this property. No other existing features will be altered.

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

There is no intention to replace the fences along side of the walkway. The design for the new fence, gate and handrails are based upon the 1965 fire escape.

- 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 new gate and fencing across the front of the walkway, and handrail are based upon the design of the 1965 fire escape. While the material is traditional, the styling is relatively modern and will not be mistaken for historic materials.

- 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 alterations are visible from the public right of way.

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 are no alterations to the essential landscape features.

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 are no changes to the layout of the steps and pathway. The new fence, gate and railings will not alter the essential integrity of the house or the district.

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.*

See below for the photographic evidence of the pipe handrails on the porch.

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 would not be incongruous to the historic aspects or the architectural characteristics of the surroundings and of the historic district and 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 William Gage a Certificate of Appropriateness** for the installation of a short fence, gate and railings on the west side of the porch steps.

1. The chain link fence on either side of the walkway shall be removed;
2. A new iron gate and short fence in the design submitted and attached below shall be installed at the beginning of the walkway to the house; and
3. A handrail shall be added to west side of entry stairs.



