

To: SHPC  
From: Kristi Chase, Preservation Planner, and  
Brandon Wilson, Executive Director  
RE: Staff Recommendations 4/17/12

**HPC 12.026 – 67-69 Florence Street – 1857 Isaac Hardy House**  
Applicant: Rocco DiRenzo, Trustee, RD Realty Trust

3/28/12

Historic and Architectural Significance

See attached survey form.

Existing Conditions

This Italianate style house has recently been added to Somerville's Local Historic Districts list so that the survey form is up to date for its condition and setting. It is located within East Somerville across from Bryant Manor, a large 1970s concrete structure. The building is in disrepair but is undergoing interior renovations to be followed by the exterior. Its restoration and rehabilitation will bring greater prominence to its place in Somerville's heritage.

Proposed Work and Recommendations

The Applicant seeks a **Certificate of Appropriateness (CA)** to:

1. Construct a brick wall with iron railings along the front of the property and the adjoining property (C/A).

HPC Guidelines for **Landscape Features and Paving** does not address fences. They state that

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

Noting that under the **Somerville Historic District Ordinance:**

- (6/ a. **Considerations of Commission.** In passing upon matters before it the Commission shall consider, among other things, *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 to similar features of buildings and structures in the surrounding area. In the case of new construction or additions to existing buildings or structures, the Commission shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the building or structure both in relation to the land area upon which the building or structure is situated and to buildings and structures in the vicinity, and the Commission may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and set back requirements in addition to those required by applicable ordinance or by-law. The Commission shall not consider interior arrangements or the categories of exclusions specified in paragraph c of this Section.*

The Commission may after public hearing set forth in such manner as it may determine the various designs of certain appurtenances, such as light fixtures, which will meet the requirements of an historic district and a roster of certain colors of paint and roofing materials which will meet the requirements of an historic district, but *no such determination shall limit the right of an applicant to present other designs or colors to the Commission for its approval.*

The Commission shall not make any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of *preventing developments incongruous to the historic aspects or the architectural characteristics of the surroundings and of the historic district.*

New Guidelines for **Fences, Gates, Railings, Pergolas & Other Structures Walls** are underway which take the above Ordinance and clarify the standards to used, state that:

*Walls are frequently significant features of the landscape, whether accommodating a change in grade (retaining walls) or defining a boundary or border (freestanding walls). Site walls may be entirely within the site or between the site and its abutters or the streetscape.*

1. Preserve historic walls whenever possible, including decorative or functional elements such as hitching posts, boot scrapers, etc.
2. *New walls should be compatible with the historic property in style, pattern, scale, placement, and materials; as with landforms, the historic character of the shape of the land should be considered when proposing the addition or modification of a site wall.*
3. *New walls should not be constructed to heights which would obscure the historic building.*
4. *Mortar joints, pointing styles, and mortar colors should be selected based on compatibility with the property's historic character and precedent. Where repairing existing mortar, new mortar should match the existing material.*
5. *When dry-laid masonry would be historically appropriate but the added structure of mortar joints is desired, deep raked joints with a dark mortar color are encouraged.*

According to Susan E. Schnare A Primer on Pickets in the Old House *OHJ* The Italianate style (1840-1890) was aligned with the picturesque landscape movement that considered fences a necessary evil, so ideally they were as inconspicuous as possible. Writing in 1850, Andrew Jackson Downing suggested that a slight paling fence, rendered inconspicuous by painting it dark green was the least offensive option. In 1870, Frank Scott proclaimed in *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds* that while fences must harmonize with the architecture and more elegant finish of the street, they should be virtually transparent: That kind of fence is best which is least seen, and

best seen through. Italianate fences may borrow details from the corbels, cornices, or brackets on the house and should be painted a neutral earth color, not the bright white that Andrew Jackson Downing detested. The picturesque landscape movement also favored rustic designs such as fences partially or wholly made from logs that took advantage of natural shapes and surfaces.

While brick and iron fences are not common, they did exist. Staff believes that it is more a matter of proportion. The posts should stand out from the wall, the pickets should not have solid bar across the top but should stand proud. The bricks should be molded or water-struck brick rather than wire-cut, which tends to have a more modern appearance (often ridge-y and pitted) - Color's definitely important, but also subjective.







