



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: 31 Warren Avenue c.1873 Hazen Sturtevant House
Case: HPC 2013.090 Warren Avenue/ Columbus Avenue LHD

Applicant Name: Richard W. Ferrari, Owner
Applicant Address: 2 Walter Avenue, Wakefield, MA 01880

Date of Application: October 27, 2014
Legal Notice: *Install unit block wall.*
Staff Recommendation: Certificate of Appropriateness
Date of Public Hearing: November 18, 2014

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: From the Form B.
The one and one-half story Mansard cottage is one of the best examples of this vernacular building style in the area. The house, recently rehabilitated, retains its clapboard siding, its decorative slate shingled Mansard roof, and its architectural elaboration including a projecting bay with a second story dormer and pierced brackets.

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



31 Warren Avenue, 1988

The property is one of many houses in the immediate area that

was built in the 1870s and 1880s when

several other mansard roofed dwellings were constructed on Warren Avenue. The area's proximity to Boston and to reliable transportation made it attractive to the middle class businessman.

In 1870 a subdivision plan was developed (called a "Plan of Building Lots in Somerville Surveyed for Ira Hill and Others". The northern portion of Warren Avenue and a small part of Columbus Avenue were included in this plan. This property (Lot #10) was included on one of several such plans that Hill and other real estate investors had drawn up



31 Warren Avenue, 2014

for Prospect Hill land. The property is part of Lot #10 and changed hands several times between the 1870 subdivision and 1876 when Hazen Sturtevant purchased the land. However, according to City Directories Hazen Sturtevant did not live there until 1881. He was one of the local businessmen who ran a large grocery and provisions store, called Sturtevant Bros. located in the Hill Building at 38 Union Square with distribution and warehousing on Hawkins Street. The Sturtevant family owned several properties in the Union Square area.

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Proposal of Alteration:

1. Install unit block wall.

The Applicant has installed a unit block concrete wall ranging from one to two tiers in height with a capstone that follows the contour of the hill. The style of block was derived from the rusticated finish of the Prospect Hill Observatory Tower and the retaining wall along the Prospect Hill Parkway.

See the final pages for details and photos.

II. FINDINGS

1. Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:

While the owners have lived there for a number of years, their current ownership began in 2005. Until recently, no applications have been received for work on this property. Richard W. Ferrari, one of the current owners said he was unaware of the Local Historic District designation and under took the construction of a low wall around the front yard using Pavestone® 3 in. x 10 in. Sierra Blend Concrete unit block bricks when his parents were on vacation. These were chosen to resemble the rough-hewn granite of the Prospect Hill Observatory Tower and the retaining walls along the Parkway nearby.

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|------|-------------------------|----------|--|
| C/NA | Donna & Richard Ferrari | 2014.006 | 1. The repair and replacement of soffits, fascia and decks shall match the existing in material, size, shape, and installation detail. |
|------|-------------------------|----------|--|

1. Precedence:

- Are there similar properties / proposals?
- Install unit block wall.

Unit block retaining walls replaced rotted landscape timbers at 18 Benton Road (2005) and 28 Warren Avenue (2002) and failing concrete walls at 85 Benton Road (2002), 27 Columbus Avenue (2002), and 73 Columbus Avenue (2006). Other unit block retaining walls were constructed at 156 School Street (2006), 53 Atherton Street (2013), 27 Warren Avenue (2013).

For the most part, the blocks have had a flat face with a rough surface. The walls have been capped. The blocks have a rough rounded profile. The cap is smoother and more rectangular in section than the blocks giving an overlapped corner rather than a tightly finished appearance.

3. Considerations:

- What is the visibility of the proposal?

The new wall is visible from Warren Avenue.

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

See photos at the end of the document.

- *Is the proposal more in-keeping with the age, purpose, style and construction 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 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.*

None of the changes to the property affect features mentioned on the 1988 Form B.

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

The original materials are not being replaced in-kind. The proposed material is a totally different material.

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

No important features described on the Form B are being replaced.

- 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 materials for the pathway and walls do not replicate 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.*

All the proposed alterations are visible from the public right of way.

Does the proposal coincide with the Specific Guidelines as set forth in the Design 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.*

The wall follows the contours of the land, rising gradually to two tiers.

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.

No changes to have been made due to changes in the character, scale or street pattern of the surrounding environment.

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.*

The addition of wall, edging and pathway

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.*

No changes to the essential layout have been submitted beyond the proposed widening of the driveway from 12'6" to the width of 14'.

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 the Westwood Road Local Historic District; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant 118 Westwood Road a Certificate of Appropriateness** for the installation granite steps and pathway.



31 Warren Avenue, detail of garden edging, 1988



31 Warren Avenue, showing new unit block wall, garden edging, and gravel surface.