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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: 237 Washington Street 1935-1936
/ United States Post Office-Somerville Main Branch
Case: HPC 2015.084 Somerville
Single Building Local Historic District

Applicant Name: Union Square Partners,
LLC – attn.: Seth Grady
Applicant Address: 36 Bay State Road,
Cambridge, MA 02138

Date of Application: November 19, 2015
Legal Notice: *Add dormer, install elevator*
shaft at rear of building, and add rooftop railing
Staff Recommendation: Certificate of
Appropriateness
Date of Public Hearing: December 15, 2015



I. HISTORIC CONTEXT

(From the Form B)

The Somerville Main Post Office, constructed in 1935-1936, occupies the majority of a large, rectangular lot on the northeast corner of Washington Street and Bonner Avenue in the Union Square section of Somerville. The building faces south toward the intersection with Prospect Street. The south facade functions as the formal entrance to the building; the north (rear) elevation is the service area with a large loading dock. The building is sited on top of a slightly inclined lawn with shrubs and mature trees. The lawn on the southwest edge of the lot has a flag pole and a memorial plaque dedicated to the victims of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. An asphalt parking lot is located to the north of the building. A concrete walkway running along the east elevation is cut into an embankment, allowing access to the basement level of the building.

The Somerville Post Office was constructed by the Public Works Administration (PWA), created by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) on June 16, 1933 with the intention of building large public works to increase employment, stabilize purchasing power, improving public welfare, and revitalizing American

industry. Unlike the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which sought to provide employment across all sectors, the PWA focused on building large infrastructure projects.

Congressman Arthur D. Healy is credited with securing the funding for the construction of the Somerville Main Post Office and the nearby Medford Post Office to replace the mail facility that handled mail for both communities. The sum of \$203,000 was allocated for the design of the buildings and enabled construction jobs for more than 150 local men. As part of the PWA mission to stimulate industrial production, local producers fabricated the exterior brick. Brickyards had been among the largest midnineteenth-century industries in the area, and a few remained in the 1930s. The post office was one of several Somerville projects funded by the PWA. Others included a school and a high school stadium (Smith 1985). In addition to housing a post office, the Somerville Main Post Office has served a number of community uses, including offices for the Social Security Administration and military recruiting. It still functions as the City's main post office.

The Somerville Main Post Office is an excellent example of a Colonial Revival style post office. The Colonial Revival style gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during a period of "creative eclecticism" in American architecture that was encouraged by the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. The Centennial Exposition sparked an interest in Colonial architecture and was followed by the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, which displayed the full potential of Revival styles. The Revival styles emphasized order, symmetry, formal design, and elaborate ornamentation with a "return to classic principles of design and, often, to the literal reuse of classical forms" (Bhaskaran 2005:58, Roth 1980:174). Many hallmarks of the Colonial Revival style can be seen in the Somerville Main Post Office, including its flat-top hipped roof, brick exterior, rectangular form, restrained granite detailing, and classically symmetrical facade with a prominent gabled center entry.

The use of the Colonial Revival style also reflected the desire to construct buildings that embodied the ideals of democracy and created a sense of permanence amidst the social and cultural changes brought on by technological advancements in the years following both the Civil War and World War I (Roth 1980:174). Large and small towns wanted their public buildings to make a statement about the permanence of American democratic ideals and to celebrate this as a unique form of government. Traditional buildings, such as post offices, also helped to express the rich colonial past of particular areas (Upton 1998). The Classical Revival style was one of the dominant styles chosen for buildings and structures constructed by the Federal government under the PWA.

The Somerville Main Post Office was designed by Louis Adolf Simon (c. 1870-1941), then Supervising Architect for the PWA. Simon was born in Boston and educated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He began practicing as an architect in Washington, DC in 1894 and entered the office of the U.S. Treasury Supervising Architect in 1896, serving as chief architect from 1905 until 1933. From 1933 until his death in 1941, he remained the PWA's Supervising Architect and was responsible for numerous post offices, custom houses, and court houses. He was the architect of the U.S. Federal Building at the New York World's Fair of 1939-1940 (Smith 1985).

Maurice P. Meade (1892-1955) was the local architect responsible for the design of the Post Office. Meade was born in Boston and graduated from MIT in 1908. In the early 1910s, he maintained a private practice at 44 Bromfield Street, Boston, and later moved to 80 Boylston Street. Meade is credited with the design of at least two other post offices, the Arlington Post Office in Arlington and the Brookline Main Branch Post Office in Brookline (both National Register-listed). He is also credited with designing a number of institutional buildings, including Saint John's Roman Catholic Seminary Complex, the Saint Augustine Roman Catholic Church Convent, and the Saint Brigid Roman Catholic Church, all in Boston. He retired in 1954 and died on October 4, 1955 (Smith 1985).

The mural in the lobby of the Somerville Main Post Office was painted by Ross Embrose Moffett (1888-1971). Moffett was born in Clearfield, Iowa, and began studying art at the Cummins School of Art in Des Moines in 1907. He later attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied with John Vanderpool and Harry Wallcott until 1913. He was also a pupil in 1913 of Charles W. Hawthorne in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and in 1914 participated in classes at the Art Students League in New York. In 1924 he established the Provincetown Painting Class with fellow artist Heinrich Pfeiffer.

During the 1930s, Moffett completed several mural projects for the WPA's Federal Art Project and later received a commission, with Louis Bouché, from the National Academy of Design for the Eisenhower Memorial Foundation in Abilene, Kansas, completed in 1956. Moffett was a member of the National Academy of Design, the American Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Gravers, and the National Society of Mural Painters.

Exterior

The Somerville Main Post Office is a two-and-one-half-story, rectangular, steel-frame and brick-clad structure with a flat-top hipped roof. The Classical Revival-style civic building sits on a high granite foundation. The facade is five bays wide with a slightly projecting, pedimented central entrance pavilion. The east and west elevations are eight bays wide, and the bays on either end project away from the plane of the elevation. The utilitarian north elevation is seven bays wide with a four-bay mail loading dock platform topped with a flat roof.

The Post Office sits on a smooth granite base that is raised one-half story at the front and topped by a limestone water table with a convex cushion profile. The exterior of the building is steel-frame construction, clad in red brick laid in Flemish bond. Limestone quoins articulate each corner, including the center pavilion and the end bays of the east and west side elevations. The roof line of the south facade and the east and west elevations are defined by a *cyma reversa* and recta limestone cornice above an unadorned brick frieze with a narrow limestone molding band. The pediment of the central entrance pavilion on the facade repeats the same cornice profile with dentils along the rakes and gable returns. The frieze line breaks at the center above the entrance with bronzed letters attached to the brick reading "United States Post Office." The hipped roof is covered in slate shingles with copper coping at the seams. The building has one tall brick chimney at the northeast corner. The chimney is laid in Flemish bond and has copper flashing and a limestone cap.

A wide, two-level granite stair extends from the Washington Street sidewalk to the main entrance. The first level, originating at the concrete sidewalk along Washington Street, has three square-nosed, granite block steps leading up to a granite block landing edged by granite blocks. The landing tapers to meet the narrower second run of eight round-nosed, granite block stairs which lead up to the granite landing at the front door. The upper flight is flanked by a wrought iron and bronze railing with a star and scroll decorative pattern that rises from spiral newel posts with decorative finials at the first-level landing. The stair railing terminates at each top corner with a lamp post with a similar star and scroll decorative motif and is topped with bronze lanterns. The balustrade around the upper landing matches the stair railing. A simple iron handrail, which appears to have been added later, is located in the center of the stairs and runs from the base to the top landing.

The main entrance is located on the center bay of the facade. The entrance is composed of two modern replacement glass and aluminum doors framed by a wooden classical pediment surround that is set within the deep reveal of a full-height arched limestone opening that culminates in a round-arch fanlight window above the door. The wood door surround has flat fluted pilasters, Doric capitols, an unadorned frieze, a denticulated cornice, a broken, denticulated scroll pediment, and a wood finial shaped like a pineapple. The arched 30-light wood fanlight with a limestone scroll keystone rises up from behind the broken scroll pediment within the limestone arch surround. Other building entrances include a set of arched wood, partially glazed, double doors located in the basement level of the east and west elevations. These doors are set in arched wood jambs surrounded by an arched granite opening. The north elevation contains two, partially glazed, steel doors. One door provides access to the loading bays and one accesses the interior of the building. The loading dock has metal overhead doors, one for each of the four bays.

Fenestration includes a recessed ocular opening above the main entrance with four limestone keys and a 16-light round wood window. The principal fenestration consists of rectilinear and arched openings with multi-light wood windows. Two 15-over-15 wood, double-hung, flat-head windows flank the facade's center bay. These windows are set in wood jambs with limestone sills, surrounds, and denticulated lintels. An unadorned limestone panel within the surround trim extends from beneath each window to the water table molding. Modern aluminum screens have been added to the windows. The fenestration on the east and west elevations is

identical. Each outer bay contains the same window type as the facade. Each middle recessed six-bay section is composed of 21-over-15 double-hung, arched wood windows set in wood frames with brick arched lintels, accented by limestone keystones and springer stones. A plain limestone panel extends from the bottom of each window to the water table molding. Basement-level windows are inserted into shallow arch openings in the granite foundation of the facade and the east and west elevations, repeating the first-floor fenestration pattern. These windows are 10-over-10 double-hung windows with arched upper sections, set in wood frames. Modern aluminum screens have been added. On the east and west elevations the basement windows have concrete window wells with an iron railing. One wood, four-over-four, double-hung window with a limestone sill and splayed brick lintel is located on the first story of the north elevation. Fenestration on the second story includes seven wood, six-over-six, double-hung windows with limestone sills and splayed brick lintels.

Interior

The interior of the Somerville Post Office retains its original configuration with the two-story lobby as the major interior space on the mezzanine level, a large open work room set behind the lobby, and small private offices on either side of the lobby. The basement level is divided between the mechanical rooms, a large workroom, and storage rooms. A narrow corridor in the western section terminates at a stair that leads to the workroom.

Currently, the only public interior space is the lobby which has a central vestibule located behind the main entrance. The vestibule is an enclosed rectangular volume set one-half story below the main lobby floor with staircases on either side leading from the vestibule to the mezzanine level. The vestibule floor has yellow terrazzo tile, black terrazzo tile detail, and a pink marble border, with thin brass edging around each tile. The south wall, which contains the main entrance doors, is covered with green marble wainscoting and a pink marble course with white marble above. The opposite (north) wall is covered in the same green marble wainscoting, with a pink marble course, but has stained wood paneling above and three wood, fixed, nine-light windows. Between each window are fluted pilasters with simplified Corinthian capitals. The east and west walls contain stained wood double doors that lead to the mezzanine stairs. Each of the four paneled doors has a six-light window, bronze kick plate, door pull, strike plate, and window grill. The doors have fluted pilasters identical to those between the north wall windows; however, the doors' pilasters are full height. Above each pair of doors is a wood, fixed, 12-light transom. The ceiling is covered in stained wood panels with a torus-style crown molding.

The exterior of the enclosed vestibule, as viewed from the lobby, is of stained wood paneling, matching the interior finish. The same fluted pilasters with simplified Corinthian capitals that are on the interior of the vestibule are located on either side of the double doors, windows, and at each corner of the exterior. The unadorned frieze is capped by a crown molding with a simple profile. Each of the double doors on the east and west sides of the vestibule open to a flight of six pink marble stairs that lead to the lobby mezzanine level. The stairwells have green marble wainscoting and bronze handrails on both sides. A balustrade behind the vestibule has a similar star and scroll motif as the balustrade and railing on the exterior staircase.

The main public lobby is a rectangular room that is two stories tall. The floor is identical to the vestibule: yellow terrazzo tiles, black terrazzo diamond tile detail, and a pink marble and black terrazzo tile border around the entire room. Thin brass edging surrounds all the tile and marble in the floor. The baseboard is green marble, with white marble wainscoting about eight feet high, with a white marble cap. Above the marble is painted plaster walls. The coffered plaster ceiling has a decorative, multilevel cornice with alternating dentil and rosette motif.

The interior trim, sill, and apron of the two 15-over-15, double-hung windows on the north wall are stained wood. The interiors of the window jambs are trimmed with white marble surrounds and caps matching the wainscoting. The fanlight above the main entrance viewed from the vestibule is trimmed with the same stained wood, including the interior of the window jamb. The sill is not visible from floor level. A two-panel wood door in a wood jamb is on the east wall, next to a modern steel elevator that replaced the original door into the Postmaster's office. There is minimal trim, but the original bronze knob, strike plate, deadbolt, and hinges are present.

Brass mailboxes, some with glass windows and some solid, are located on the west and east walls of the lobby. Only one set of boxes is included in the original design, but all the boxes are designed to be in keeping with the building's style. Stained wood bulletin board cases with gold lettering and glass doors are located on the south and north walls. These cases, one labeled "civil service" and two labeled "bulletins," are original to the design of the lobby. Modern aluminum ventilation grates have been laid into the original metal grates with the same star motif as on the balustrades of the lobby. A large service counter with stained wood trim and a wood countertop is located on the north wall.

The upper portion of the east lobby wall displays a mural, 21 feet long by 6 feet tall, entitled "A Skirmish between British and Colonists near Somerville in Revolutionary Times." The mural was commissioned by the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (also known as The Section of Fine Arts) and was painted by Ross Moffett in 1937. The mural depicts the fighting that occurred near Union Square during the American Revolution when the British retreated from Lexington.

The other interior spaces relate to the function of the post office. A large work room is behind the main lobby on the mezzanine level. The work room is a two-story, open room with five steel posts near the center. Four skylights located near the center of the work room and one skylight over the service counter on the south wall provide optimal natural light. A cat-walk, or look-out gallery, above the work room runs parallel to the south and north walls and bisects the middle of the room. Windows inside the workroom have painted wood trim and locking metal grills. Auxiliary spaces on the mezzanine level include a service elevator, bathrooms, special delivery offices, a mailing vestibule, storage rooms, a vault, and the superintendent's office, all of which are inaccessible to the public. A staircase located in the northwest corner of the building runs between the basement level and second story. The U-shaped staircase has cast-iron stairs and a wrought-iron handrail and is within an enclosure with plaster walls and ceiling.

The basement level contains a large auxiliary work room with wood flooring, tongue and groove painted wainscoting, and a painted concrete ceiling. The north side of the basement contains a boiler room, fuel room, and service room. The south side of the basement is split by a long corridor running parallel to the facade. The west side contains bathrooms, supply rooms, equipment/janitorial space, and offices. The south side of the corridor contains five offices with three-panel, stained wood doors, with original brass knobs and strike plates, set in a simple surround of stained wood with four-light hopper transoms. The basement-level windows are trimmed in painted wood with locking metal grills over the inside.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I. Proposal of Alteration:

Due to the complex nature of the proposal, the Commission is referred to the draft plans for which they received a link on Tuesday, December 8, 2015, and all online addendums added thereto. Further, the Commission is referred to the hard copy booklet of these draft plans provided at the time of the meeting.

II. FINDINGS

A. Considerations:

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

All of the proposed work is visible from public ways.

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

The exterior of the structure is generally in good repair.

- *Is the proposal more appropriate than the existing conditions? Is the proposal more in-keeping with the age, purpose, style and construction of the building?*

The proposed dormers are in a style, material, form and massing that are consistent with those typical of the Colonial Revival style and are consistent with the overall design and style of the building. In order to activate the rooftop level, raising the elevator shaft to the roof is necessary.

Elevator shaft: While all three material considerations would generally be appropriate (brick, metal to match the dormers, and glass), Staff recommends that the glass top to the shaft. This will allow the public to see through the shaft and minimally obstruct any views at the rooftop level.

Rooftop railing: Staff generally takes no opinion as to the style of metal railing proposed for the rooftop other than to offer that, given the significant distance from the public way at which the railing will rest, the simpler the design of the railing the better. This railing will be seen as such a distance from the public way that any historically-sympathetic detail will be difficult to discern from the ground level.

Lantern (monitor) – Staff generally takes no opinion as to the form and style of the lantern/monitor proposed. It is historically in keeping for the Applicant to install this feature in the area where one once existed in order to bring natural light into the core 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 affect 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.*
- B. *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.*
- D. *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.*
- E. *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.*

Staff finds that the proposal, including all design alternatives, coincides with the General Approach set forth in the Design Guidelines. See comments under A. *Considerations* above.

A. Exterior Walls

1. *Wood Siding: clapboards, shingles, board and batten, etc.*
 - a. *Retain and repair original or later important material whenever possible.*
 - b. *Retain and repair, when necessary, replace deteriorated material which matches as closely as possible.*
 - c. *Invest in quality paint and proper preparation.*
 - d. *Synthetic siding (aluminum, vinyl, artificial stone or brick) is prohibited because it severely compromises the appearance and integrity of old buildings.*

B. 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.*
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.*

C. New additions

1. *New additions should not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the property and should be compatible in size, scale, material and character of the property and its environment. Where possible, new additions should be confined to the rear of the house.*
2. *It is not the intent of these guidelines to limit new additions to faithful copies of earlier buildings. New designs may also evoke, without copying, the architecture of the property to which they are being added, through careful attention to height, bulk, materials, window size, and type and location, and detail. A building should not, however, be altered to an appearance that predates its construction.*
3. *New additions or alterations should be done in a way that, if they were to be removed in the future, the basic form and integrity of the historic property would remain intact.*

The proposed alterations to this structure are in keeping with the design guidelines. See comments in A. Considerations above.

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 alterations for which an application for an Historic Certificate has been filed are appropriate for and compatible with the preservation and protection of the Union Square Post Office Single Building Local Historic District. Therefore, **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant Union Square Partners, LLC a Certificate of Appropriateness** to alter 237 Washington Street road with the following conditions:

1. All appropriate building permits and any Special Permits or Variances shall be obtained prior to the start of any work.
2. The HPC and Preservation/Planning Staff understand that, once work beings “in the field”, some changes to the proposal may be necessary based on building conditions. Any changes to the plans approved at the December 15, 2015 HPC meeting shall be submitted to and discussed with Preservation/Planning Staff for review prior to implementing the change. Staff will then determine if the nature of any further changes will necessitate a full review by the Commission.
3. Historic Staff shall issue a sign-off upon completion of the project that this was done in accordance with the Certificate and approved plans.