

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

SOMERVILLE

Report Date: 1980

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: October, 1980

Community: Somerville

I. TOPOGRAPHY

City occupies approximately 4.1 square miles along the divide between the lower Charles and Mystic River watersheds. This divide is formed by a group of drumlins which are the backbone of the city and provide the direction of grain to the street network. Of these hills, Winter and Spring hills are now the highest (about 130 feet elevation), lying on either side of the lowland through which runs the Boston & Lowell Railroad. The northeast side of these drumlins drains directly into the Mystic River, which forms part of the city boundary with Medford; the hills to the southwest drained into Miller's (once "Willis's") Creek, a vanished Charles River tributary, now largely traced by the route of the Fitchburg Railroad. Alewife Brook, tributary to the Mystic, marks the city's northwest boundary with Arlington.

Within the city limits, there has been no useful waterpower. The city's principal natural resources in the 18th and 19th centuries were the extensive outcroppings of slate (bedrock) and the rich glacial clay deposits.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Charlestown grant of 1630, formed as independent town in 1842. Original line between Cambridge/Somerville from early 17th century, surviving segments include: from Miller's River to Inman Square 1632 common pales division (possibly earliest remaining political line in Boston area); and Inman Square to Alewife Brook 8 Mile Line of 1636; also some later 19th century adjustments. Medford/Somerville boundary apparently early 18th century origin with 1685 rangeway divisions preserved as adjustments near College Hill and Alewife Brook. Mystic River established as Medford/Charlestown line by late 17th century, with Boston/Somerville line set around Sullivan Square in 1842 (as Boston 1873).

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Urban industrial city on Boston transport corridor to northwest. Located on Mystic Valley with close proximity to Charles River tide marshes and important native camp site on College Hill over Alewife Brook. Originally outer Charlestown common land with location of Gov. Winthrop's Ten Hill farm on Mystic River. Little surviving evidence of 17th century, save for north/south rangeway grid and early political boundary with Cambridge. Primarily a grazing area of Colonial dairy farms with one notable early 18th century gambrel house and unique stone mill at Powder House Square. A critical military position in Revolution with fortifications on Prospect Hill, some remnants still evident in park. Important corridor of turnpike, canal and railroad routes from Boston during early 19th century with fringe institutions (convent and insane asylum) and brickyards along Mystic and Miller's River. Became independent town in 1842 with civic focus on Highland Ave (including original Greek Revival city hall) and commercial focus at Union Square with well preserved district of period structures on Bow St. Rapid suburban subdivision during late 19th and early 20th century along east/west trolley routes creating extensive street grid with dense residential fabric

of period housing, primarily two-family, ranging from worker's cottages and tenements along railroad axis to architect designed houses on Spring and Winter Hills. Well preserved Victorian churches and Colonial Revival neighborhood on Summer St. National industrial firms of meat packing, candy and speciality goods, although few surviving period factories, except fragment of North Meat on Medford Street and Ford plant on Mystic Valley Parkway with adjacent Victorian city stables. Increasing urban density by mid 20th century with brick apartments on Highland Ave and tenement rows around Union Square. Development of retail strips along Broadway and Elm St around Davis Square with notable period movie theatre, Art Deco bank and diner. Presently suffering from fringe location, especially deteriorated neighborhoods in East Somerville and vacant industrial land along railroad yards. Tufts University and Red Line subway will affect development potential in West Somerville with expansion of residential and commercial activity along College Ave.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Regional corridor for trails from Mishawum (Charlestown) to: Charles River-south; Menotomy (Arlington) west; and Mystic Valley (Medford) northwest. Documented route from Cambridge-Charles River along Washington St through Union Square with possible branch over Miller's River to East Cambridge along Medford-Gore Sts. Western route to Alewife Brook from Union Square along Bow-Somerville-Elm Sts to Beech St at Porter Sq with conjectured trail north to Mystic on College Ave around Powder House Sq. Likely trail from Charlestown to Mystic-Medford along Broadway-Main Sts around Winter Hill with possible branch to Ten Hills on Temple St. Other likely routes include projected trail along Alewife Brook north from fish weir to native village on College hill, although no evidence of surviving trail.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented period sites known. Sites likely along Mystic River and Alewife Brook. Two references in the 1630's suggest Contact period antecedents: Ploughed Hill, now Convent Hill in East Somerville, a probable native planting field; a native village (the home of 'Sagamore John'), located on the high ground to the east of the Alewife brook/Mystic River confluence.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to both major seasonal fish runs in Mystic River and Alewife Brook as well as extensive shell fish beds along Mystic and Boston Harbor. Good agricultural land also available. Proximity to coast made this a likely area for European-native trade.

D. Observation:

Like Cambridge, a focal point of the trail network and seasonal food gathering activities. Despite the likelihood of numerous sites having been present, the survival rate is probably very low.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1676)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as local highways with extension of Broadway over Winter
MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report: Somerville

Hill to Powder House Sq. and Alewife Brook connecting to mill at Arlington by late 17th century. Highway to Winthrop estate at Ten Hills appeared as Temple St from Winter Hill - Broadway.

B. Population:

Mostly grazing in land of Charlestown residents. Probably no more than a dozen families for much of the period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Defined as outlying area of Charlestown "without the neck" as common grazing. Few local farms by 1630's, notably Woolrich on Washington St - Union Sq. and Winthrop estate at Ten Hills on Mystic River (no obvious site survival) Squaw Sachem's village on Alewife Brook - College Hill intact through mid 17th century (no obvious site survival).

D. Economic Base:

First ship built in the colony reputedly Winthrop's "The Blessing of the Bay" in 1631 at Ten Hills Farm. Earliest activities mostly grazing, fishing and some agriculture.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway network from 17th century expanded with primary radial routes from Charlestown: Washington, Broadway and Somerville - Elm- College Aves. Field division of Stinted Pasture between Broadway and Somerville Ave in 1681-85 created grid of N/S rangeways: Franklin, Cross, Walnut, School, Central, Lowell, Cedar, Willow Sts over Spring, Prospect, and Winter Hills: additional rangeways (North and Curtis Sts) over College Hill. Portions of Highland Ave extended around Prospect Hill to School St with Medford and Newton Sts extended to Miller River from Union Square by mid 18th century.

B. Population:

Growing population, probably reaching 500 by end of period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Division of Charlestown Commons in 1680's created several farmsteads on Winter, Spring and Prospect Hills by early 18th century, many by Tufts family with houses along main highways. In addition, local brick making along Millers and Mystic rivers and quarry sites around Spring and Powder House Hills created a rural industrial zone for Medford-Charlestown-Cambridge area with windmill at College Square. Fortification system established on Prospect and Winter Hills in 1775 by American forces with apparent survival of earthworks at Prospect Park.

D. Economic Base:

Proximity to Boston and Charlestown gave town early prominence in agriculture and dairying. Redware pottery, brickmaking, and slate quarries also active.

Stone windmill constructed by Jean Mallet at Quarry Hill, c1710 (NR).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Only two early houses survive; the Timothy Tufts House (1714?) and another 18th century house at Temple and Sewall Streets; both gambrel roofed, interior chimney structures.

Commercial, Institutional: No known structures extant.

Industrial: The only surviving early industrial structure is the slate Powder-house (c.1710), originally a windmill.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Construction of Boston bridges to Cambridge and Charlestown in late 18th century created radial turnpike network through area by 1810. Mystic Ave (from Charlestown). Medford, Prospect and Beacon Sts (from Cambridge) created junction of routes at Union Square. At same time opening of Middlesex Canal from Charlestown in 1803 reinforced Mystic River axis to Medford Canal route between Mystic Ave and Broadway through Foss Park along Albion Ave (no surviving evidence).

B. Population:

No separate population figures exist before 1842. Limited growth during this period probably associated with new bleachery, turnpikes and canal.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Transport improvements with turnpikes and canal opened area to fringe development from Boston. McLean Insane Asylum converted from Barrell estate on Miller's River in 1818 and Ursuline Covent established on Mt. Benedict in 1824. Other fringe activities of the period included bleachery on Somerville Ave. and brickyards on Miller's River and Broadway. Commercial activity focused at Union Sq. during early 19th century with strip development on Broadway and Mystic Aves along canal. Remainder of area continued as local farms for Boston market with specialization in dairy cattle.

D. Economic Base:

Extensive farming, milk production, and stock raising. Considerable brickmaking activity along Medford turnpike with some yards along Washington Street. Bleachery established in 1801 on Milk Row (now Somerville Ave.), remained in use through 1930's.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Though scattered settlement appeared along early routes, very little, if any, of this survives, save for some Greek Revival houses, some of which may date as early as 1830.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: No known structures extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpikes and highways remain from early 18th century. Middlesex Canal abandoned in 1840's. Railroads constructed across Somerville to junction at Charlestown-Boston with: Boston and Lowell from Medford between Winter and Prospect Hills (1835), Fitchburg from Cambridge around Spring Hill & Miller's River (1841), and Boston and Maine across Mystic (1845). Later branch to Arlington through Davis Sq (1870). Local transit routes from Cambridge and Medford through Somerville to Charlestown-Boston established along Washington and Broadway by 1840's. Early street railway lines by 1850's from Charlestown through Union Square along Washington -Somerville-Elm Sts and Broadway-Main to Medford. Highland Ave and Summer St to Spring Hill extended from Union Square during 19th century with extension of Holland St from Davis to Teele Sqs.

B. Population:

With establishment of town in 1842, community experienced growth, which continued at an accelerated pace for a century, coming to a halt only with the Depression in 1929. In the first 8 years, 1842-1850, the population more than tripled, reaching 3,540 by the latter year. In each of the succeeding decades until 1870 the population again nearly doubled. In 1865 Irish immigration made up about 18% of the population.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Creation of independent Somerville established civic center on Highland Ave with commercial focus at Union Square. Further expansion of transport system by steam and street railroads across area encouraged industrial and residential development along primary routes. Miller's River gradually filled for railroad yards and meat packing plants as small factories were located along Boston and Lowell and Fitchburg railroads. Residential subdivisions laid out along primary transit routes near Charlestown and Cambridge in East Somerville and Spring Hill by the mid 19th century. Establishment of Tufts College on Medford line created positive focus in West Somerville in contrast to local brickyards.

D. Economic Base:

Manufacture of brick reached its peak at the end of this period, employing at one time as many as 220 men. Most of the yards were small, the largest (in 1860), on the Medford Turnpike, producing 1.3 million bricks a year. One short lived aberration appears to have been the Boston Press Brick Co. (1853-c.1858), equipped with 2 steam engines, 5 patent presses, and an annual production of 5.5 million bricks. Stone quarries continued to be worked for much of the century.

Establishment of the American Tube Works, 1851, led to manufacture of the first seamless brass tubes in the U.S., based on an English patent. (The present tube works complex dates to a largely 20th century modernization). In 1865, the tube works, together with the Milk Row Bleachery still accounted for more than half the annual product value of manufactures. These companies marked the entrance of heavy industries into Somerville, and were soon followed by rolling and slitting mills, iron works, and manufactures of steam engines and boilers.

Encouraged by similar works in East Cambridge, the Union Glass Co. was founded in 1854. With the introduction of silvered glass in 1862, this product became a specialty item of the firm in the production of knobs, globes, lamp reflectors, and the like.

Agricultural and livestock products, combined with rail access and proximity to Boston, led to the early development here of food processing plants including distilleries, vinegar works, bakeries, and in particular, meat packing plants. The North Meat Packing Plant was begun only a few years after the nearby works of John P. Squire in East Cambridge, but by the 1890's had grown into what was reputedly the largest plant outside of Chicago.

This period also saw the peak of agriculture pursuits, as farming lands were increasingly swallowed up in subdivisions. In 1865, the state census counted 22 farms still operating.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The earliest surviving residences are a cluster of well preserved sidehall Greek Revival houses at East Somerville. Other sidehall and center entrance Greek Revival houses stand above Somerville Avenue, with a few later examples along Highland Avenue and just south of Elm Street. Many simple Greek Revival/Italianate houses dating from the 1850's stand at Union Square, along Bow Street and just north of Somerville Avenue and also at East Somerville. Other examples survive in the neighborhood south of Elm Street at Davis Square. Towards the end of the period, mansard roofed single family houses and a few rowhouses begin to appear around Union and Davis Squares. One exceptional structure is the Round House on Beech Street, a completely round, Italianate house built in 1857.

Institutional: The main body of the Greek Revival/Italianate Town Hall (1852) survives beneath later Colonial Revival additions.

Commercial: One simple Greek Revival/Italianate frame commercial building remains on Washington Street at Union Square: also the lower floors of the brick Italianate Greek Revival Union Square Hotel (c.1850).

Industrial: No known industrial structures extant.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Steam and horse railways remain from mid 19th century. Conversion of streetcars to electric trolleys by early 20th century with routes on Broadway, Medford, Highland, Summer, Prospect-Cross and Somerville-Elm-Holland Sts. Junctions at Union, Powder House, Davis and Teele Sqs. Extensive rail yards created around Miller's River and along Mystic during period.

B. Population:

Somerville's greatest suburban growth occurred in this period. Between 1870 and 1915 the population increased six fold. Despite the developing industrial base, probably less than 10% of this figure was related to local manufacturing. By 1905 approximately 27% of the population was foreign born - still predominantly

Irish, but with substantial numbers also from Nova Scotia and English speaking Canada.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued expansion of Boston metropolitan economy evident throughout Somerville. Extension of trolley service prompted an early complete development of Colonial commons into residential subdivisions. Affluent neighborhoods on Prospect St and Spring Hills along axis of Highland Ave and Summer St and similar area on Winter Hill. Commercial centers continued to expand at Union Square and at Davis Square in West Somerville. Fringe industrial activity completely obscured Miller's River and extended along mainline railroads to Cambridge and Medford with infilling along the Mystic River.

D. Economic Base:

The year 1870 saw the peak of recorded brick production both in Somerville and in the county as a whole. The economic expansion of the 1865-70 post war years was manifestly evident both in population growth and in the brick industry; in 1870 Somerville's 12 yards produced over 24 million bricks annually. The period came to an end with the panic of 1873. By 1885 only two yards remained, and the last yard closed in 1902. Many small yards were forced out by rising land values and the cost of new equipment which competition demanded.

During this period, the meat packing industry gave the city the reputation as "the Chicago of New England". In 1875 the annual product of the three packing plants was nearly twice the total value of all other manufactured products. The largest plant was that of Charles North, who in 1878-79 built a new brick plant on Medford Street, significant portions of which still survive. The Norton Tallow Works adjacent was a natural offshoot of this massive industry.

One of the results of the city's phenomenal growth was a strong building industry. It is said that virtually half of all Somerville's residential construction took place in the decade 1890-1900. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the directories were full of carpenters, builders, lumber yards, and woodworking shops - including coffin makers, manufacturers of picture frames, office furniture, museum cases, tables, and the like. Related products included architectural hardware, brass foundries, tinware works, and makers of window shades. Many of these firms began in Boston, relocating in Somerville in the 1880's and 90's. From its inception, Charlestown's Mystic Water Works (1861) had been closely associated with Somerville, and the city was authorized to connect its lines to those of Charlestown in 1868. Twenty years later the city built its own monumental high service plant (now demolished), and joined the Metropolitan system in 1898. The Somerville Electric Co. (1887) served Somerville as well as several other nearby towns with street lighting at a relatively early date.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Somerville achieved its present, densely settled residential character during this period. Concentrations of well detailed suburban houses, including some architect designed examples, in the Queen Anne, Shingle and Colonial Revival styles are located on Prospect Hill, along Highland Avenue, Central and Summer Streets. Other clusters of ambitious houses are found on Broadway at Winter Hill and at West Somerville along College Avenue. A few ambitious row-houses and apartment blocks were also built in these same neighborhoods. Elsewhere, Colonial Revival and Queen Anne two family houses predominate with some

pretentious examples concentrated between Highland and Somerville Avenues west of Central Street and more modest (and usually later) examples south of Ball Square, in the Ten Hills section and southwest of Washington Street. Concentrations of three deckers follow the upper slopes of Spring Hill and Highland Avenue, with scattered three deckers on Somerville Avenue and also on Broadway. Two early wood frame Colonial Revival apartment blocks (1892) stand at Union Square.

Institutional: Many highstyle municipal structures date from this period including the Beaux Arts classical Library (1884), High Victorian Gothic Police Station (1874; now Boy's Club), several early 20th century Romanesque fire stations, a stuccoed Armory, and the castellated Prospect Hill Monument (1903, E.W. Bailey). A number of highstyle church buildings were completed, the most significant being the Shingle Style Winter Hill Congregational Church (1897), and the Richardsonian Romanesque Unitarian (1894, Hartwell and Richardson) and Prospect Hill Congregational Churches (1887, H.S. McKay).

Commercial: Union Square retains a good number of late 19th century commercial blocks with one High Victorian Gothic example (the Eberle Building, 1874), several other more modest brick structures and the neo-classical Somerville National Bank (1915); although most originally rose three and four stories, many have had upper floors removed. Other three and four story brick commercial buildings in revival styles stand at Davis Square with many smaller scale commercial structures at neighborhood centers.

Industrial: Several well detailed brick Romanesque structures survive from the North Meat Packing Company (1879). Other extant industrial structures are utilitarian in design and include the Derby Desk Factory, Somerville Electric Light, Kiley Wagon Shop and American Tube Works.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and trolley routes remain from early 20th century with conversion of secondary carlines to trolleybus in 1930's. Auto highway routes constructed by Metropolitan District Commission include McGrath and O'Brien Highway/ Route 28 between Cambridge and Medford, with original 1924 truss bridge over railroad at Highland Avenue; and Alewife Brook- Mystic Valley Parkway (Route 16) from Medford-Cambridge in 1930 with original period bridges over Mystic River. A surviving period rotary traffic sign in Powder House Square.

B. Population: The city's population continued to expand significantly until 1930, spurred by continued industrial and commercial growth and suburban expansion, reaching 103,908 in 1930. During World War II, population reached a peak of 105,883, but with plant closings, city has since experienced continual decline reaching 80,596 in 1975 - equivalent to the city's population in 1912.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Remaining open land developed as residential subdivisions in West Somerville around Tufts College - Alewife Brook and around Ten Hills. Local retail strips

emerged along Elm Street between Davis Square and Cutler Sq., along Broadway at base of Winter Hill, and along Highland Ave trolley route. Union Square retained its commercial activity. Civic focus remained on Highland Ave with local suburban neighborhood on Spring Hill. Industrial activity continued to expand along Miller's and Mystic Rivers with regional warehouses and railroad yards for Boston area. Adjacent working class neighborhoods developed around Union Square - East Somerville along Charlestown line.

E. Economic Base:

"Few cities in the East", Orra Stone wrote in 1930, "have had a greater industrial growth during the first quarter of the twentieth century". Of 145 manufacturing establishments in the city, 75% of them had located in the city since 1900. The leading industry - represented by 4 firms and 55% of the total 1927 product - was still the wholesale slaughtering of animals and packing of meat. Two of the most recent firms were the Ford Motor Co., whose 1926-27 assembly plant became one of the city's largest employers, and First National Stores (1927), who, like the A&P, a few years before, built substantial warehousing facilities in the city. Ford was to reach its peak during World War II. The plant assembled the new Edsel in 1957, and closed the following year. The automotive industry is represented today by an even older firm, the James A. Kiley Co., whose c.1896 carriage shop on Linwood Street is still part of the complex which now manufactures truck bodies.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very few houses were built after the 1920's; at the extreme northern edge of town, along Alewife Brook Parkway, a number of simple single and two family houses were built along with some houses possibly dating as early as 1940 along Boston Avenue. Some Georgian Revival '20s apartment blocks were built around Davis Square and along Highland Avenue.

Institutional: The present Georgian Revival Police Station and several schools were built, as were a few churches, including the Romanesque Catholic Church on Summer Street.

Commercial: Commercial building of the period consists primarily of one story brick stores at neighborhood centers, though some more ambitious commercial blocks were built at Davis Square and Union Square.

Industrial: A number of the two and three story brick and concrete block factory buildings on Somerville Avenue date from this period, as do the Ford plant and the First National warehouses (both 1927) at East Somerville.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS:

A comprehensive survey is presently being completed by Carole Zellie and Landscape Research. The existing MHC survey files are at best sketchy; there are no industrial buildings noted.

Of Somerville's 19th century industrial history, there are not many extant. One of the oldest and largest is that of the North Meat Packing Plant on Medford Street. Both this company and the Derby Desk Co. (20 Vernon St) were nationally known in their time and are probably deserving of NR nominations.

The most significant properties have been surveyed (residential).

Further research and a possible Thematic or NR nomination for Somerville's churches (which emerge as the most cohesive and architecturally significant grouping) could be done. Other districts might include the area around Prospect Hill (late 19c single family houses). The crest of Broadway at Winter Hill, and Summer Street/Central Street intersection from Highland Avenue back to Central. Davis Square, too, might work as well preserved early 20c commercial district (actually better preserved than Union Square) with good surviving 19/20c residential neighborhoods behind to north and south.

XII. SOURCES

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