

## **Evolving Face of East Somerville: From Horse-Drawn Trolleys to Transit Stations**

*Tour researched and led by Ed Gordon, President of the Victorian Society in America, New England Chapter  
Sunday, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

Co-Sponsored by the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission and East Somerville Main Streets

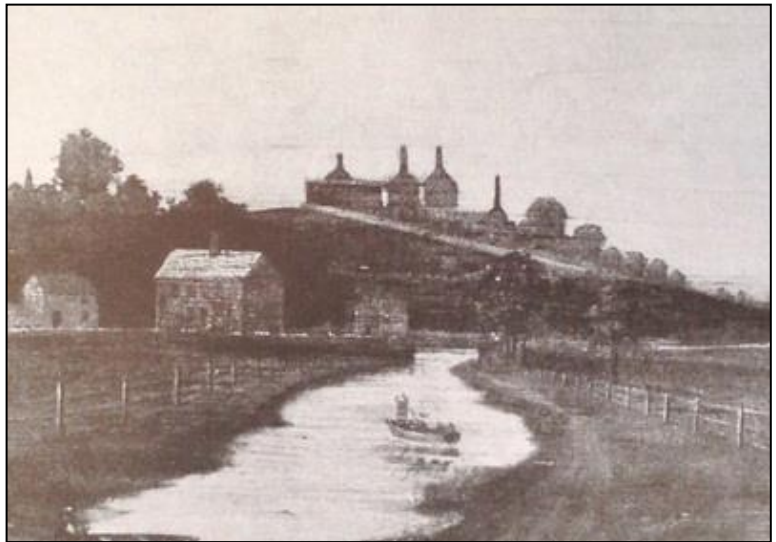
*The tour begins at the East Somerville Branch of the Somerville Library, 115 Broadway.*

East Somerville, arguably more than any other area of Somerville, has experienced the most radical alterations to its topography. Transportation projects that introduced canal boats, trolleys and commuter trains to the area; a hill reduction that paved the way for residential construction; and land-making to accommodate industrial growth – these factors have all resulted in notable changes to the neighborhood’s landscape and streetscape.

The story of transportation innovations in East Somerville goes back nearly 400 years. It begins with **Broadway**: in the mid-1630s. The road was set out from Charlestown Neck (Sullivan Square), ascended the east slope of Winter Hill and then turned northwest to follow Main Street before proceeding into Medford by way of a bridge over the Mystic River. Paul Revere followed this route to make his legendary horseback ride to Lexington ahead of the British redcoats. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Broadway was extended over Winter Hill, continuing along its current path all the way to Menotomy (now Arlington). Until as late as the 1840s, Broadway in East Somerville was bordered by a handful of Colonial-era farms.

The East Somerville section of the **Middlesex Canal** was built between 1793 and the early 1800s. The introduction of the Canal had surprisingly little impact on construction in the area beyond a ditch-like depression cut through low-lying land between Broadway and Mystic River wetlands. Most of the Canal-related commercial and residential construction took place in Sullivan Square, Charlestown around the Canal’s southern terminus. In East Somerville, the Canal was primarily used for transporting building materials as well as some farm products.

Beginning in the mid-1830s, railroads began to surpass the Canal as a faster and more efficient mode of transportation. The railroads in East Somerville were located along the southern and eastern periphery of the neighborhood. The introduction of passenger service during the early 1840s on the Fitchburg line (running parallel to Somerville Ave.) encouraged the construction of residential enclaves south of Broadway that became populated with homeowners who commuted to jobs in Boston. Rail lines located along the eastern edge of East Somerville included the Boston and Lowell and Boston and Maine lines, chartered in 1830 and 1833, respectively. Railroads eventually caused the Middlesex Canal to cease operations during the early 1850s. The Ford Motor Company built an enormous automobile assembly plant in this



Looking east along the Middlesex Canal toward the ruins of the Ursuline Convent atop Nunnery Hill in East Somerville as seen in a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century painting.

area in 1926, taking advantage of extant Boston and Maine Railroad spur lines that would serve their enterprise well.



The introduction of trolleys, at first horse-drawn (late 1850s) and later electric (1890), encouraged commercial development along Broadway in East Somerville and residential construction in the section south of this Colonial-era thoroughfare. The dawn of the Automobile Age during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left its mark within Somerville's commercial districts in general, and particularly in East Somerville, as garages, auto body shops and gas stations were built along Broadway and Washington Street.

The northern part of East Somerville between Mystic Avenue and the Mystic River was once characterized by wetlands. The soil in this area was rich in a type of clay that was ideal for brick-making during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1830 to 1880, the landscape between Broadway and Mystic Avenue was scarred by clay pits and brick kilns associated with this industry. Brick chimneys associated with kilns added a less-than-picturesque quality to areas located in the vicinity of Foss Park. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the land occupied by a handful of brick manufacturers (Jacques, Bennett, Parker, et al.) was becoming more valuable as sites for residential development. Somerville's population—and associated house construction activity—exploded between 1880 and 1910. The City's population was almost 25,000 in 1880, and by 1910 had reached just over 77,000 residents. Half of its current building stock was created during this period. In the case of Seman Klous, a residential developer who assembled a large tract of land north of Broadway between Austin Street and Foss Park, a financial crisis—The Panic of 1873—prevented him from realizing significant lot sales. Klous' tract, now the States Avenue area of two-family residences, was not built-up until the 1910s.

The removal of a storied hill in the States Avenue section of East Somerville during the late 1870s obliterated the neighborhood's most picturesque natural feature and paved the way for house construction. Called Nunnery Hill, the western end of this long, steep, oval-shaped protrusion had been the site of the visually striking ruins of the Ursuline Convent. Built around 1820, this convent and religious school was destroyed in 1834 by an angry, misinformed mob. The local people in what was then Charlestown's western hinterlands did not want followers of the Pope in their midst. The havoc that ensued represents the nadir of relations between Protestants and Catholics in the Boston area.

The most drastic alteration to East Somerville's landscape occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s when Interstate 93 was built in the central section of East Somerville. This elevated super highway created a barrier that divided the neighborhood in half and resulted in the loss of many houses and businesses in the path of this highway project. As the tour will highlight, this super highway discourages foot traffic between the Broadway commercial/residential district and the mixed-use development of Assembly Square and Assembly Row.

That the Broadway and Assembly sections of East Somerville are on the rise as places to live, work and shop, despite a variety of challenges, is a result of the persistence of community groups, cooperation between public and private sectors, and the proximity to existing and new Orange Line train stations (Sullivan Square station and Assembly Station, the first new MBTA station in twenty years). The Broadway commercial district boasts a vibrant ethnic restaurant scene and both local and chain restaurants are available in the new Assembly Row section of Assembly Square. Specialty shops along

Broadway and outlet stores at Assembly attract shoppers with well-priced goods, making East Somerville an exciting destination for early 21<sup>st</sup> century city dwellers, business owners, and consumers.

Built in 1918, the **East Branch of the Somerville Public Library** is a satellite of the Central Library atop Central Hill. Situated at the corner of Broadway and Illinois Avenue, this library was well positioned to serve a new category of patrons: automobile owners who wished to combine shopping on Broadway with checking out or dropping off books. In addition, this branch library was an amenity that may have helped the sales and rentals of the new houses in the still-developing area behind this building. Here, two-family residences bordered avenues named for American states.



Somerville's public library system began in 1872, the year the community incorporated as a city. The East Somerville branch was organized in 1912 and initially located in commercial space at 153 Perkins Street. East Somerville's library is noteworthy for the simplicity of its rectangular masonry form, as well as its Classical Revival ornamentation that includes Ionic and Doric pilasters and a heavy entablature below the flat roof's cornice. The Library building owes its existence to funding provided by Andrew Carnegie, the Pittsburgh

steel magnate. A native of Scotland, Carnegie funded hundreds of fine libraries throughout Great Britain and the United States from 1895 to 1930. Carnegie attributed his success in business to having the good fortune to have, in his youth, access to the private library of a wealthy family in his hometown. Somerville is fortunate to have had him finance all three public libraries.

Located a few blocks to the north of the library, the demolition of the hill variously called High Field, Mount Benedict, and **Nunnery Hill** represents one of the more dramatic transformations of East Somerville's landscape. The leveling of Nunnery Hill during the late 1870s occurred because the area was seen by developer Seman Klous as a prime place to build row houses. Residential construction was not immediate, however, and the commodious two-family houses that characterize this area were not built until the 1910s. The loss of this eminence meant that the ruins of the Ursuline Convent would no longer serve as a reminder of what can happen when ignorance and bigotry trumps reason and decency. Angry Protestant locals who were against immigration and Catholicism stormed the hilltop convent. The riled-up agitators were intent on casting out Catholic nuns rumored to be filling their students' minds with immoral and anti-American teachings. Luckily the nuns and their students, who were young Unitarian ladies of means, had enough warning to escape unscathed from the ensuing chaos. The mob, composed of farmers, brick yard workers and others, set fire to the convent. When the smoke cleared all that remained were the convent's outer walls and the charred remains of religious books and furnishings. Several decades would pass before Catholic churches could be established with little difficulty in the Boston area.

**161 Broadway, Park Garage Company, 1914** - This building is typical of an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century garage, which was primarily used for the storage of cars. It also featured pickup and delivery services, a gas pump, and waiting rooms. The original owners were Arthur N. Park and Fred R. Curtis. The garage had space for 40 cars, a machine shop for repairs in the basement, and two 500-gallon gas tanks. It also housed a showroom for Ford, Marmon, and



1932 Advertisement for the Marmon Sixteen

Marathon cars and a car rental business with a 1914 Packard limousine for rental! The building is currently undergoing façade repairs.

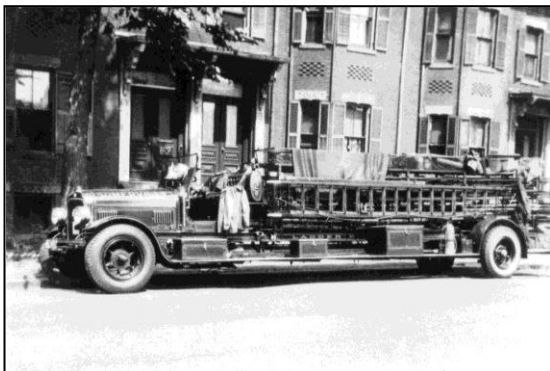
**165 Broadway, Senior Center & former Fire Station** - This red brick building was built in 1895 as Fire House Engine No. 2. It is difficult to categorize this building: it is stylistically similar to an early Florentine Palace, but lacks the characteristic crenellated tower and other details. Designed as a fire station, it provides evidence of the high density of the East Somerville neighborhood after 1890, and which notably accelerated after the electric trolley was introduced around 1900. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the building became home to the community's elders as a senior center, as well as to the youth of the City.

*Dominating the southeast corner of Broadway and Cross Street, 160-166 Broadway is a major landmark on Broadway by virtue of its substantial rectangular three-story, gable-roofed form.*

Originally built ca.1885-1894 as four attached 2½-story late Italianate residences, this row was hoisted atop a new commercial first story during the early 1920s. (A twin row, in situ, can be seen on Cross Street around the corner.) Interestingly, the tan brick

walls at the first stories of the Cross Street and rear walls were constructed in 1948 rather than the 1920s when brick of tan coloration were in vogue for commercial structures. This row illustrates a fairly common solution for gaining commercial square footage in the Boston area during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This row was built as an investment property for Samuel Langmaid, a major real estate developer in Somerville during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His best known property, Langmaid Terrace (1892), is located further to the west on Broadway near the summit of Winter Hill. While the Langmaid Terrace ensemble is characterized by a sophisticated, picturesque red brick Queen Anne design, 160-166 Broadway stands in contrast as an unpretentious wood vernacular row.

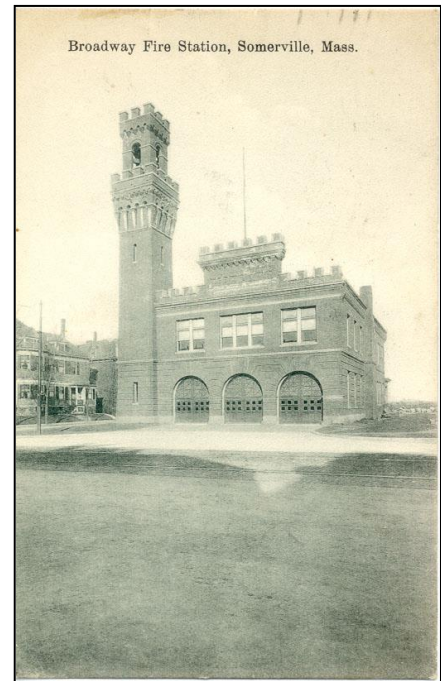
Thanks to early 20<sup>th</sup> century Somerville business directories we know the identities of 160-166's early residents, including: Mrs. F. Crandall and James E. Thompson, clerk (160), Anthony A. Waterman, postal clerk (162), Frank S. Whiton, foreman teamster who worked in Quincy Market's North Market building (164), and Robert F. Garland (166), who worked at a laundry. None of these residents lived here during the 1890s, suggesting a steady turnover of renters. In 1925, 160-166 Broadway's commercial tenants included David Larkin's Dry Goods (160), Joseph DeGurlotta's provisions (162), M. O'Keefe Inc.'s Groceries (164) and Adams Brothers Confectioners (166). In addition, the dentist office of Merrill A.



Dorion was located at 166 Broadway. Residing upstairs in the residential units were individuals of Irish, Italian, French and English heritage.

**Row Houses at 8-16 Cross Street East (LHD)**

This red brick row was constructed at the request of Seman Klous, a brick maker and land developer. Klous owned the first building to catch fire in the Great Fire of Boston in 1872, as well as all the land between the rear lot lines of Austin Street and Foss Park (known as Broadway Park from 1865 to 1880). Although the condition of these



East Broadway Fire Station, 1917

row houses reflects deferred maintenance due to prolonged disinvestment, one can still see the untapped potential of the fine bones and Mansard style essence of this circa 1880 building.

**181 Broadway** is a well preserved Queen Anne single family residence which was adapted for reuse as an assisted living residence during the late 1990s. Built in 1888 for Joseph Warren Litchfield, a prosperous local milk dealer, this wood frame house is noteworthy for its asymmetrical massing as well as its typically Queen Anne mix of clapboards and shingles. The lot appears on the 1884 Somerville Atlas as part of a large undeveloped tract between Garfield Avenue and Kensington Avenue owned by Niles and Littlefield. Prior to 1889, Litchfield is listed at 51 Webster Street in East Somerville. The house originally had a large barn located in its back yard that presumably housed horses and wagons associated with Litchfield's milk delivery business. By the early 1900s Litchfield's business is listed as "livery stables at Medford." Litchfield lived at 181 Broadway until the early 1910s. After the Litchfields vacated the premises this house's next owner/occupant was Gustav A. Towle, manufacturer, who lived here from 1914-1919. Grace and Samuel Lombard, manager, lived here briefly during the early 1920s. By 1924, this house was unoccupied and by 1927, The Elwood G. Bryant family began its long period of ownership. He was either the son or more likely grandson of John Bryant who began providing funeral services as early as 1852 in Charlestown. By the 1920s the Bryants had funeral homes at 15 Austin Street, Charlestown and 181 Broadway. John Bryant was the proprietor until at least the early 1940s. By 1950, Bryant Funeral Services was owned and operated at 181 Broadway by Elwood G. Bryant and his wife Louise. Evidently this house was the Bryants' residence as well as work place. By 1960, Elwood and Louise's 39-year-old daughter Ruth A. Bryant, housewife, is the sole family member listed here.

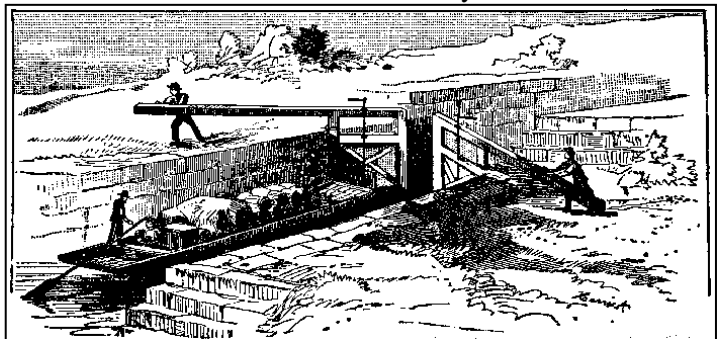
Since the late 1990s, 181 Broadway has been owned and administrated by CASCAP, INC, an organization of assisted living facilities. CASCAP's renovation of the Joseph Warren Litchfield House resulted in the retention of many examples of fine craftsmanship, as seen in the beautiful woodwork and stained-glass features found throughout the house.

### **Garfield Street Mural**

The National Endowment for the Arts has awarded East Somerville Main Streets, in conjunction with the Somerville Arts Council, a grant to fund a place-making initiative for East Somerville during 2014 and 2015. The initiative, called "This is East," celebrates, maintains and promotes East Somerville's identity at this time of change for the neighborhood. This mural is part of a larger place-making initiative that includes video stories, special events and more.

**193 Broadway** is a towered Queen Anne which is part of Broadway's collection of late Victorian era residences located between Cross Street and McGrath and O'Brien Highway. By 1874, this house's lot was part of the extensive real estate holdings of Seman Klous who owned most of the land on the north side of Broadway between Austin Street and Foss Park. 193 Broadway was the house that ice built. The house was constructed in 1891 for George W. Maddox, an ice dealer whose business was located in Charlestown. By 1915, Maddox had moved further west in Somerville to 18 Liberty Avenue and the house was subsequently subdivided into a two family residence.

*Walking west along Broadway we will cross Fellsway East (McGrath and O'Brien Highway) and gather at the southern end of Foss Park. Before discussing the creation of Broadway Park, later **Foss Park**, mention should be made of an important Federal Period Transportation innovation which extended through this green space. A segment of the **Middlesex Canal***



*was extended across the southern third of Broadway Park, later Foss Park, between 1792 and 1803.*

The 27-mile long Middlesex Canal was built at a cost of \$528,200 between 1792 and 1803. Organized and operated by one of the first public corporations in America, the Canal's charter was approved by none other than Massachusetts Governor John Hancock. The Middlesex Canal was the second waterway of its kind in America, the first being the Santee Canal in South Carolina. By connecting Chelmsford on the Merrimack River with Boston, the Middlesex Canal helped to spur development in eastern Massachusetts. The Canal provided a more efficient means of transporting materials like lumber and granite as well as farm produce.

The mastermind behind the Canal's construction was Loami Baldwin, the "Father of American Civil Engineering." Later in his career he designed granite sea walls and the great dry dock at the Charlestown Navy Yard (1830s). The Middlesex Canal played a role in the construction of legendary landmarks. For example, the lumber brought from the Merrimack Valley was used to repair ships such as Old Ironsides during the War of 1812. Similarly, wood delivered by the Canal was used in the enlargement of Faneuil Hall Market by Charles Bulfinch in 1805. Granite that was transported via the Canal was used in the construction of University Hall at Harvard in 1815. During the Canal's heyday in the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was used primarily to haul building materials, farm products and a variety of goods although picnickers reportedly traveled via Canal boats to Horn's Pond in Winchester. The Canal's demise during the early 1850s is attributable to a variety of factors, including its inability to stay in good repair because of the harsh New England climate. The most significant factor, however, was competition from the railroads.

The first one, the Boston and Lowell Railroad, was introduced in 1834. While the canal boats could only remain in operation 8 months out of the year, railroad cars could provide service year-round. The train could also maintain a strict timetable and generally provide faster and more efficient service. As the fortunes of the Canal declined, the lands adjacent to and near the Canal's path were gradually carved up into house lots and sold by the Sullivans and other owners. At first the Canal's terminus at Charlestown Neck attracted limited development, including a tavern, some residences, and Canal-associated buildings, such as offices, store houses, a smith shop, and a lock tender's house. By circa 1870, the Neck had become host to Sullivan Square where the focus was a circular park surrounded by a cast iron fence. This ornamental park was later swept away by the West End Elevated Railway, started in the early 1900s.



### **Foss Park**

Set out over 16 acres of low-lying wetlands called Happy Hollow during the early 1870s, Foss Park extends northward from Broadway to Mystic Avenue while its eastern and western edges are defined by Fellsway East (McGrath and O'Brien Highway) and Fellsway West (originally called Chauncy Street). This swath of green space provides much needed park land for recreational activities within one of the most densely built up cities in the Commonwealth. By the early 1870s, pressure from real estate developers such

as Seman Klous to clean up these wetlands forced the City to find the money to create a park that would ultimately cost over \$200,000. Traversed by meandering paths, the centerpiece of the park was a shallow pond that would serve both wading children and rowers in small boats. The landscape architect hired for

this project was Charles Elliot who was hired by the City in 1874. He is perhaps best remembered as the landscape architect of the Middlesex Fells parkland during the 1890s. No sooner had the creation of the park begun when controversy arose with tales of city employees padding their hours while others were accused of fiscal irresponsibility. Mayor George Brastow, developer of Spring Hill in the 1840s and 50s actually lost the Mayoralty in part because of his pro-park position. The anti-park faction, however were later defeated by citizens who ended up in favor of the new park—despite its lack of centrality within Somerville or significant historical associations with Revolutionary War era encampments.

Broadway Park was re-named Foss Park in 1920 in honor of Private Saxon Conant Foss who sacrificed his life for America and its allies during World War I. He was the son of the revered Somerville librarian and poet Sam Walter Foss. Saxon C. Foss was a Harvard graduate and a newspaper-man who had been a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Boston Globe*. One of 5400 casualties of “the Great War,” he managed to survive the horrific battle of Belleau Woods in France only to be mortally wounded by enemy fire near Champagne on October 8, 1918. In 1919, his family was given the Distinguished Service Cross in his honor.



*Next: We will pause at the intersection of Broadway and Fellsway West to look westward towards Winter Hill. Visible on the north side of Broadway is the towered form of a former Methodist Episcopal church which became the headquarters of the Elizabeth Peabody House in the 1960s. To a surprising degree, given the expansion of commerce along Broadway from 1890 to 1930, the north side of Broadway between Fellsway West and Grant Street retains the appearance of a late 19<sup>th</sup>-to-early 20<sup>th</sup> century residential streetscape of single and multi-family residences.*

**The Elizabeth Peabody House** at 277 Broadway, corner of Grant Street, is a preschool with ties to the first English-speaking kindergarten in America. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894) was inspired by the early education model of Friedrich Froebel, the German inventor of kindergarten; following his model, Peabody founded her kindergarten in Boston in 1860. In addition to being an educator, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was a historian, friend of the writers known as the Transcendentalists, and a sister-in-law of the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. In 1896, a settlement house was established in Peabody’s honor to serve both children and parents in the West End of Boston with educational and enrichment



Elizabeth Peabody House

programming. One alumnus of the program was Mr. Spock himself, Leonard Nimoy. The demolition of the West End neighborhood in the early 1960s caused the Elizabeth Peabody House to close and move to the former Methodist Episcopal Church on Broadway.

The Church evolved from a small religious society that was founded in 1872. Apparently, its early worship services were held in private residences until they built this Colonial Revival Church during the early 1900s. The church retains its original form and some of its original architectural elements.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs indicate that not

unlike King’s Chapel in Boston, the congregation never completed a multi-stage steeple.

*Turn right (north) onto Fellsway West, and walk northward to Mystic Avenue.*

**18-26 Fellsway West** is a row of red brick Queen Anne residences that were built in 1884 for a T. G. Smith. They were among the first buildings built on this street facing Broadway (later Foss) Park. Originally called Chauncy Street, Fellsway West may have been viewed by Smith as a thoroughfare ripe for the construction of upscale masonry attached houses. If this was Mr. Smith's vision, the trend towards construction of masonry row houses built to take advantage of park views, never materialized. Instead fairly modest one- and two-story houses were built along Fellsway West, between Broadway and Mystic Avenue. T. G. Smith owned only a small percentage of land bordering Fellsway West. By far the major landowners of the blocks on the west side of Foss Park were the heirs of Clark Bennett. Together with the Jacques, Ames, Reed and Parker families, Clark Bennett was a major brick manufacturer north of Broadway. Clark Bennett's heyday as a brick manufacturer occurred between 1831 and 1856. Bennett lived in the Union Square section of Somerville and after the mid-1850s he prospered in insurance. After Bennett's death in 1882, his heirs began to open the former brickyards to residential construction.

*Continue to walk northward along Fellsway West to the small Gothic Revival church at 66 Fellsway West.*

The former **Christ Episcopal Church at 66 Fellsway West** was built in two stages between 1913 and 1928. L-shaped in form, this brick, stucco-parged Gothic Revival church began as "a small edifice" designed by Lynch Luquer in 1913; it now reads visually as the church's south ell. The Episcopal congregation was organized in 1909 and services started in 1914. The church was expanded in 1926-1928 by a brick sanctuary addition designed by Charles Carden Coveney. The structure has intersecting gable-roofed components, a stone foundation, and stucco-parged walls, but its most salient feature is likely the large, stained glass window with a pointed arch, located above the entrance porch, at the center of the sanctuary's east gable. The large window within the main façade is set within a blind, pointed arch. The side walls are pierced by five pairs of pointed arched windows.

The church was built to serve Episcopalians living in the area between Sullivan Square in Charlestown and the Grace Church parish in Medford. Congregants of Emmanuel Episcopal Church of Spring Hill, Somerville (since demolished) and St. Thomas' of Union Square, Somerville (no longer holding services) reportedly helped to found the church. Among the church's best known parishioners was Lester Ralph, an Episcopal clergyman and a former Mayor of Somerville during the 1970s. Christ Episcopal Church offered services until at least 2005, and currently houses the Self Realization Center.

Charles Carden Coveney (1874-1945) was a Boston architect and active layman in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Coveney initially worked for Charles F. Brigham on the yellow brick annex of the Massachusetts State House during the 1890s. From 1906 until 1920 he was a partner in the firm of Brigham, Coveney and Bisbee. During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he worked as the supervisory architect on the construction of the Annex to Boston Christian Science Church (1894). His post 1920 work includes the design of St. Cyprian's Church in Roxbury (1921) and churches in New York City, as



Annex to the Christian Science Church, designed by Charles Carden Coveney.



well as a High School in Fairhaven, MA. Reportedly some of the church's furnishings and lighting fixtures came from St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Union Square Somerville, which is still there, but has been serving social service organizations since the 1960s.

*Turn right at the intersection of Fellsway West and Mystic Avenue and walk east along the northern edge of Foss Park.*

Mystic Avenue was originally part of an early Federal period toll road known as the **Medford Turnpike**. It was laid out in 1803 to link the marketplace at City Square in Charlestown and the entry to Boston, via the Charles River Bridge (1786), with Medford Square, via the Sullivan Square/southern terminus of the Middlesex Canal.

Now look directly in front to see **Interstate 93**, the elevated highway that divides East Somerville into two distinct commercial/ residential areas: the southern half incorporating Broadway and the adjacent residential enclaves dating back to the 1840s, and the new northern Assembly Square half that has been rising since the early 1980s like a phoenix from the ashes of earlier industries, including most notably the Ford automobile assembly plant. Construction of I-93 began shortly after President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act, providing 90% Federal funding. By 1963, more than twenty-four miles of highway, stretching from Medford to New Hampshire, was built at a cost of \$47 million dollars. Interestingly, construction of the final, three-mile Somerville leg of the highway was delayed for many years by community groups who tried in vain to halt the massive disruption and dislocation it would cause. More than 300 Somerville families and 90 businesses were relocated for this link of the highway, completed in 1973.

*Carefully navigate the sidewalk that runs under the elevated I-93 highway and cross over to the north side of Mystic Avenue, next to the La Quinta Hotel. Turn left and walk northwest alongside the Fellsway.*

Built in 1967, the **Somerville District Court at 175 Fellsway** is an unusually well-designed mid-20<sup>th</sup> century example of a Colonial Revival institutional building. Since this building does not appear on the 1959 Sanborn Atlas it is clear that no part of the building was constructed before the late 1960s. The Colonial Revival style is an umbrella term that overarches five sub-styles popular between 1710 and 1830, including the low, high and late renditions of the Georgian style, as well as the revival of the Federal and even Greek Revival styles. This dignified red brick building falls within the High Georgian Revival subset of this style, which can be seen in the swans neck scroll pediment at the main entrance, the cornice-headed window surrounds, the pilaster-ornamented walls of its wings and the distinctive clock tower which is enclosed by a low dome. By the late 1960s, Boston was still swept up in modernist design for its public buildings, so this court house represents an interesting deviation from that trend. Its construction nearly a decade after the closing of the Ford automotive plant located behind it may have been designed to bring new life to this under-utilized section of East Somerville.



John Winthrop

Look west across the Fellsway to see the **Ten Hills neighborhood** in the northeastern section of Somerville. Its landscape is dominated by a single hill (not ten, as the name would suggest), with its peak roughly at the intersection of Temple and Putnam Roads. The somewhat wedge-shaped area incorporates about 50 acres (200,000 m<sup>2</sup>), and is bounded by the Mystic River to the north, McGrath Highway to the east, and by Interstate 93 to the southwest, topographically separating it from the rest of Somerville. Assembly Square lies to the east and Winter Hill to

the southwest.

John Winthrop, the Puritan Governor of The Massachusetts Bay Colony, built a house in the Ten Hills neighborhood overlooking the Mystic River at the intersection of Gov. Winthrop Road and Shore Drive. Winthrop's farm stretched from Broadway to the wetlands bordering the Mystic River. His farm was owned by a succession of prominent men, including Elias Haskett Derby of Salem and Patrick Henry Jackson of Lowell. The last vestiges of Winthrop's residence disappeared in 1877.

**The Fellsway** beginnings are rooted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century landscaped parkway movement. While today parkways are associated with automobiles, the Fellsway was envisioned in 1895 as a thoroughfare for the horse-drawn vehicles of city residents to escape to the new Middlesex Fells park lands further to the north, in Malden, Melrose and Stoneham. Charles Elliot, the renowned landscape architect who designed the Middlesex Fells, was a partner in the Brookline-based landscape architectural firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Elliot. These Olmsteds were the son and stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted, the early and highly celebrated designer of parks throughout America. When the firm's plans were executed in 1897, Broadway (Foss) Park was treated as the starting point for this parkway system, hence the rationale for renaming the streets on the east and west sides of the park Fellsway East (originally Winthrop Street) and Fellsway West (originally Chauncy Street). The Fellsway, from Mystic Avenue and the Wellington Bridge (1875-1878), was intended to be a "pleasure drive" with a landscaped median strip. By the 1920s, automobile ownership in the Boston area had become relatively widespread, and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the pleasurable aspects of this late Victorian thoroughfare had been compromised by street widenings and adjacent parking lots.



Charles Elliot

*From the Somerville District Court round the corner of Fellsway and Middlesex Avenue to view the much altered former Ford Motors assembly plant from which the Assembly Square/Assembly Row name is derived for this still-evolving neighborhood.*



Interior: Ford Motor Company plant, Somerville, MA in the 1950s

**The Ford Motors automobile assembly plant** was built in 1926 on a 52 acre site that had recently been reclaimed from the south bank marshes of the Mystic River. The mid 1920s was a transformative time for the section of East Somerville north of Mystic Avenue. The Northern Artery was constructed as part of Route 28 which stretched for 152 miles over existing and new roads, starting from Eastham on Cape Cod to Methuen on the New Hampshire border. It was later renamed the McGrath and O'Brien Highway, and is possibly the only major traffic artery named for two priests associated with St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Union Square, Somerville. Also located near the Ford plant was the large

**First National** plant, which distributed groceries and baked goods to chain stores of the same name. First National utilized the existing Boston and Maine spur lines to distribute its products. Its business provided an enormous boost to the local and regional economy. When First National closed in 1976, Somerville lost over one thousand jobs.

The Ford plant was noteworthy for its use of natural daylight via a “saw tooth” system of skylights on the roof. The new facility encompassed 340,000 square feet of floor space. The length of the plant measures 1,300 square feet, and vertically, the single-story building stretches fourteen feet to the bottom of the trusses and another sixteen feet to the gable of the roof. The plant had a roof pond that stored water above the roof to control the temperature of the interior. At night, the insulation is removed and the water is exposed, enabling significant amounts of heat by radiation to escape into the night sky. Early in the morning, the insulating panels are pulled back to protect the water from the heat of the day and solar radiation. The water remains relatively cool throughout the day, cooling the ceiling of the space below.

A special edition of the *Somerville Journal* that celebrated the facility’s opening noted that “the very height of the interior and the pleasantness of the daylight coming from overhead gives each working man a mental attitude of contentment, next in itself to the great outdoors.” Older Somerville residents recall that a long line of windows along Middlesex Avenue allowed passersby to watch the progress of cars moving along the assembly line. They also remember a well-tended landscape around the plant which may be hard to envision given the current sea of asphalt-paved parking lots around the site.

Named for Henry Ford’s heir, Edsel Ford, the Edsel automobile was deemed by the American public to be unattractive, overpriced, and overhyped. The Edsel never gained popularity with contemporary American car buyers and sold poorly, which was unfortunate for Somerville where its manufacture emanated. The Ford Motor Company lost \$250 million on the Edsel's development, marketing and manufacturing, and its name became synonymous with commercial failure. The plant was expanded in 1937, and then closed its doors forever in 1958, in the wake of the Edsel fiasco.



1959 Edsel Ranger 2-Door Hardtop

Fast-forwarding to 1979, the City of Somerville declared the Assembly Square District to be blighted and substandard. In an effort to assist in redevelopment, it adopted the "Assembly Square Revitalization Plan," outlining a 20-year urban renewal strategy. Under the plan, the area’s focus began to shift from industrial to retail uses, with a cornerstone being the rehabilitation of the former auto assembly plant into an indoor collection of retail businesses, to be known as the Assembly Square Mall. The shopping center opened in 1980 with 360,000 square feet (33,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of retail space, with the largest being Kmart and Jordan Marsh as anchors. Like many smaller “dumbbell” style malls of its era, the anchor stores were at each end of the mall with a straight hallway between, and a food court in the center. A six-screen (considered huge at the time) movie theater and a four-story office building were also built on the site. Two new roadways, Assembly Square Drive and New Road, were constructed to improve access within the area. The design of the interior represented a reflection of the building’s heritage as a factory, with exposed ceiling beams and other architectural elements, especially within the Kmart store. When Kmart renovated their store during the late 1990s, these architectural details were removed.

By 1992, a Home Depot store had been built on the 11 acre site next to the former Ford facility. In 1996, the fortunes of the Mall looked bleak when Macy’s purchased Jordan Marsh and proceeded to shutter their Assembly Square store. By 1999, most of the mall had been closed off, except for Kmart and Building 19 which had moved into the old Macy’s/Jordan Marsh space.

By 1998 the Assembly Row development bordering the Mystic River began to take shape. A citizens group, known as the Mystic View Task Force, was formed to advocate for community interests in future Assembly projects. According to a pamphlet published in April 1999 this was “a group of individuals from varying backgrounds who are working together to educate, involve, and inform residents of

Somerville about development and city planning, particularly in relation to the Assembly Square/Mystic Riverfront area.” They envisioned a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use development that could provide 30 additional acres of usable open space, over 30,000 diverse jobs, and over \$30 million in new net tax revenue. The Task Force presented evidence that they believed showed how Assembly Square could easily achieve those goals if it was developed as an office-based neighborhood with supporting retail and housing. In order to do that, however, they asserted that big-box behemoths — which had dominated much of the Assembly Square redevelopment discussion — could not be an option. The proposed construction of a mammoth IKEA store was derailed in court by community members who favored development of the waterfront site as parkland. The story of “smart growth development” that is still being executed in the Assembly Square area will be addressed at the last stop on the tour.

*From Middlesex Avenue continue northward along the Fellsway to the park along the Mystic River.*

The **Mystic River** has a long history of industrial use and a continuing water quality problem. The Mystic River’s name is probably derived from the Native American Wampanoag word “Muhs-uhug,” meaning big river. In Algonquian language, “Missi-Tuk” means “a great river whose waters are driven by waves,” a phrase that speaks to the original tidal nature of the Mystic. The river flows from Lower Mystic Lake and travels through Arlington, Medford, Somerville, Everett, Charlestown, Chelsea, and East Boston, where it joins the Charles River to form inner Boston Harbor. The Mystic River is deceptively big, given that it flows only seven miles from its confluence with Boston’s inner harbor to the Mystic Lakes of Arlington, Medford and Winchester. What is truly impressive about the Mystic is its watershed, which encompasses 76 square miles and contains 44 lakes and ponds, and associated streams and brooks.



Aerial View of Somerville, 1925

The first settlers to describe the mouth of the Mystic, in 1621, were Pilgrims from Plymouth. Ten years later John Winthrop, after establishing his Ten Hills Farm, began to explore the river. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Mystic was deep enough to sustain shipbuilding at Chelsea; the river even supported shipbuilding in Medford in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first stirrings of a movement to create parkland along the Mystic River began after the creation of the Metropolitan District Commission in 1894.



Sylvester Baxter in 1893.  
Photo by Elmer Chickering.

The City of Somerville created a popular bathing beach along Shore Drive on the west side of the Wellington Bridge. A wooden beach pavilion erected in 1908 was replaced by a more substantial structure in 1925. It was closed in 1947 due to growing concern about pollution in the vicinity from animal rendering and other noxious enterprises. Currently the primary challenges to making the Mystic River fit for swimming is addressing the persistent storm water runoff, overflowing storm and sewer pipes, industrial pollution, and lawn fertilizer that drains from extensive paved surfaces nearby.

The **Sylvester Baxter Riverfront State Park**, encompassing 6.1 acres, was dedicated by Governor Deval Patrick in September 2013. The park was named for Sylvester Baxter (1850–1927), an American newspaper

writer, poet, and urban planner in the Boston area. In 1893 he became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Metropolitan Park Commission. With Charles Eliot, he was a chief force in the development of the Metropolitan Park System of Greater Boston.

The 6.1 acre park includes a new dock, amphitheater, pathways, landscaping, and views of the Mystic River. Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), the developers of the area known as “Assembly Row,” funded the creation of the \$3.5 million park. At the park’s dedication ceremony, Governor Patrick said the new park and Assembly Row project are an excellent example of state, local, and federal governments partnering with the private sector to spark economic growth. Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone said the park represented “the riverfront our community has always deserved.”

*The last stop is the new neighborhood now known as Assembly Row.*



The **Assembly Row** segment of Assembly Square is an expression of the “smart growth” or “Compact City” movement. Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact, walkable urban centers to avoid land use sprawl. It advocates compact, transit-oriented, pedestrian- and biker-friendly land use that includes neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices. In 2000, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) that oversees the City’s urban

renewal plans acquired title to a 9.3-acre former railroad parcel in Assembly Square, and issued a request for proposal (RFP) to developers. At the same time, the City initiated an extensive public planning process, producing the “2000 Planning Study” which set out a new vision for Assembly Square as a 24-hour mixed use district incorporating residential, retail, office, cinema, restaurant, hotel, and recreational open space uses. In 2002, the SRA and the City adopted a 20-year extension of the urban renewal plan with the goal of transforming Assembly Square into a lively, mixed-use district as set forth in the 2000 Planning Study. Assembly Square was rezoned to promote the mixed-use concept, and design guidelines and a design review committee were created to provide additional assistance in promoting the new vision.

In 2005, Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), a Maryland-based real estate investment trust and developer, purchased the defunct Assembly Square Mall, along with other properties in Assembly Square. FRIT quickly redeveloped the existing interior mall the next year, turning it into the “Assembly Square Marketplace,” a strip mall with a variety of big-box stores such as Christmas Tree Shops, A.C. Moore, Sports Authority, Bed, Bath and Beyond, and Staples.

Later in 2006, Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone helped bring FRIT and IKEA together to devise a feasible redevelopment plan consistent with the new vision for the whole area, especially along the waterfront. FRIT and IKEA agreed to trade parcels, moving IKEA inland from its initial site along the Mystic River, and enabling FRIT to create a pedestrian friendly, mixed-use development plan that was welcomed by those previously opposed to the IKEA development. The land swap was executed in October 2009, solidifying the new vision for the wider district.

After more than a decade of planning, IKEA formally pulled out of the Assembly Square project in July 2012, stating that its more recently constructed Stoughton store was sufficient to serve its area customers. FRIT announced the following year that it would purchase the 12 acres (49,000 m<sup>2</sup>) from IKEA, giving them ownership of the majority of the property at Assembly Square.

After two years of addressing the environmental remediation needs of the former brownfields site, ground was broken in April 2012 for the construction of two residential apartment blocks, a new main street, and a new MBTA transit stop to be known as Assembly Station at the northeast end of Foley Street. The apartment buildings, the Avalon at Assembly Square (195 units) and AVA Somerville (253 units), were designed by Elkus Manfredi Architects

and developed by AvalonBay Communities Inc., a U.S.-based Real Estate Investment Trust and manager of luxury apartments.



A 20-foot tall giraffe in front of the new Legoland Discovery Center in Somerville's Assembly Row.

*Photo: Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff.*

The General Manager of FRIT will be addressing the tour group to further outline their ongoing plans for redeveloping the area. During this talk, please enjoy the amphitheater and riverfront view as well as the complimentary refreshments that they have generously provided.

Thank you for taking this tour! For additional information about other projects and programs sponsored by the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission, contact the staff located within the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development on the third floor of City Hall, or via [www.somervillema.gov/departments/historicpreservation](http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/historicpreservation) or 617-625-6600.

The mission of East Somerville Main Streets is to “improve the life of our community by building investment, connection and pride in our main streets.” For more information about the host of activities and events they organize, contact [info@eastsomervillemainstreets.org](mailto:info@eastsomervillemainstreets.org) or their Executive Director Teresa Vazquez-Dodero via [teresa@eastsomervillemainstreets.org](mailto:teresa@eastsomervillemainstreets.org) or 617-623-3869.