



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PLANNING, PRESERVATION, & ZONING DIVISION (PPZ)
HISTORIC PRESERVATION

STEP 1: DETERMINATION OF HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE
STAFF REPORT

Site: 15 & 17 Oak Street

Case: HP25-000063 & HP25-000064

Applicant: Adam Dash & Associates

Owner: Hope and Prospect Development
LLC

Proposal: *Demolish principal structure.*

HPC Meeting Date: September 3, 2025



Above: Front Elevation of 15 & 17 Oak St

The purpose of a staff report is to provide the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) with additional information and professional assessments regarding properties that are proposed for demolition. These assessments are based on the criteria allowed for consideration by the HPC in accordance with the Demolition Review Ordinance (DRO). A Staff Report is not a determination/decision, nor does it constitute authorization in any form.

***Below:** Aerial view of 15 & 17 Oak Street and the area. See below photo for building identification and neighborhood context.*



Below: 15 Oak Street Entrance right elevation



Below: 15 & 17 Oak Street left elevation



Below: 15 & 17 Oak Street rear elevation



The images below are of both the abutting structures on the left and right side of 15 & 17 Oak St. These gable front residential buildings with Italianate architectural features are very common throughout Somerville. According to historic maps, these structures were all built between 1874 and 1895. All three of these structures share similar form and massing and Italianate style details. (steeply pitched gabled roofs, 2 story bay windows, deep eave and windows under the front gable peak)

Below: 11 Oak Street (left-abutting)



Below: 21 Oak Street (right-abutting)



III. HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Historical Context: 15-17 Oak Street is a gable front residential building with Italianate architectural features on the front, and the appearance of two more Federal-style facades on either side. Despite being built in the mid-19th century, it presents a balanced blend of contemporary (19th century) and past (18th century) design features. It is located in the Union Square neighborhood a block from the Cambridge city line. The building is two and a half-stories with one 1960s era addition on the rear. The entrance to 15 Oak Street is on the left side of the building and the entrance to 17 Oak Street is on the right side. The original structure on the subject property was constructed prior to 1874 but solidly in the middle of the 19th century

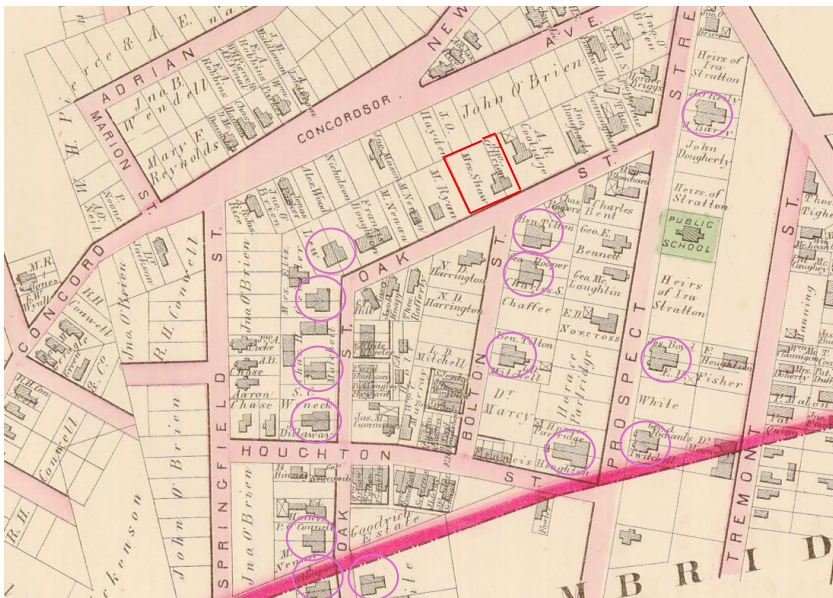
Historic map research indicates that this portion of Somerville had a substantial increase in residential density from 1852 to 1874. In 1852 when the Draper Map was created, this neighborhood had nearly no structures..

Below: 1852 Draper Map (overlay of future parcel subdivisions)

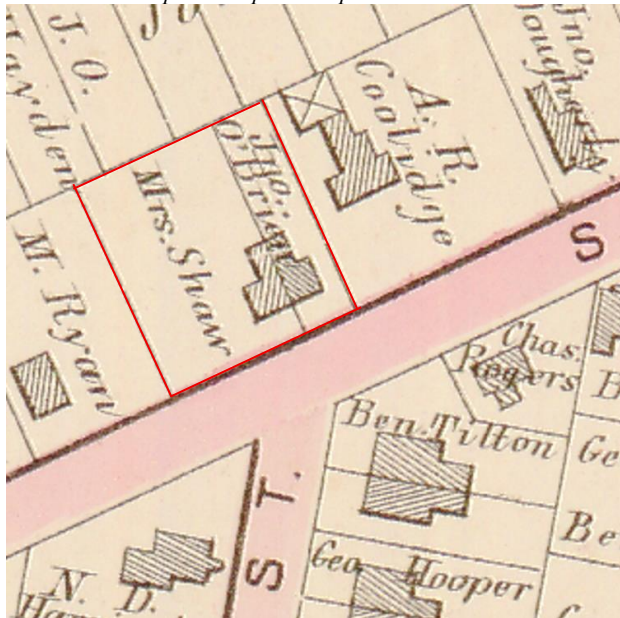


By 1874, the neighborhood was filled with multi-family homes, single-family homes, and the Union public school. Duplexes and 4 unit residential buildings divided down the middle by a property line were popular in this area. Below is the 1874 Hopkins Map with homes of similar massing in the area, which also shows bay windows being present on many of the neighboring homes. The drastic difference in density from 1852 to 1874 is likely due to its proximity to nearby train routes, like the modern day Union Square station.

Below: 1874 Hopkins Map



Below: 1874 Hopkins Map close-up



1874 is the first time the building at 15 & 17 Oak St is shown on historic maps. The 2 units are split by a property line through the middle with a 'Mrs. Shaw' owning the 15 Oak St unit and John O'Brien listed as owning the 17 Oak St unit. John O'Brien owned large swaths of the neighborhood along Springfield St, Concord Ave, and Oak St.

Below: 1873 Somerville City Directory

O'Brien John (J. O'Brien & Co.), groceries, provisions, and wholesale butcher, Prospect, cor. Webster ave. h. **Oak**, n. Bolton [pl.
Union sq. bus. st. at Union sq. corner
Shaw Hardman, glassmaker, h. Oak, n. Bolton
Shaw Henry, paper hanger, bds. S. H. Willis's, Wash.
Shaw Henry M. gas fitter, h. Pinckney, n. Washington
Shaw Lydia, widow of Charles, h. Franklin, n. Perkins
Shaw Lydia A. wid. of Chas. L. h. Franklin, c. Franklin av.
Shaw William, gas fitter, N. S. Shattuck's, Union sq. bds. **H. Shaw's**, Oak, n. Bolton
O'Brien Thomas, clergyman, h. Webster ave. n. Union sq.
O'Brien Timothy, butcher (B.), h. Bolton, n. **Oak**

O'Shea Nicholas, teamster, h. **Oak**, n. Prospect
O'Shea William H. photographer (Salem, Mass.), h. **Oak**, n. Prospect

Around the time the subject property was built, John O'Brien and several relatives lived on Oak St. There were also several Shaw's listed in the 1873 directory as living in the location of the subject property. John O'Brien was a local grocer who owned J. O'Brien and Co. The 1873 Somerville City Directory lists a Nicolas and William O'Shea as being residents of the property. Although the exact address is not listed, future directories indicate the O'Shea family occupying a unit in the subject property for several years. Many of the residents and owners of 15 and 17 Oak St were listed as first or second generation Irish immigrants according to census data.

In October of 1874, John O'Brien sold the property to Annie L. O'Shea. That same year, Thomas Rafferty purchased the 15 Oak St unit of the property from Annie O'Shea.

Thomas Rafferty was a plumber and resident of the subject property according to the 1875 Somerville City Directory.

Below: 1875 Somerville City Directory

Church (and 12 Merrimac, B.), bus. 1. Rafferty &
Rafferty Thomas, plumber (179 Hanover, B.), h. Oak, n.
Bolton

An article in the 1878 Springfield Daily Republican, Thomas Rafferty's wife is claimed to have died by setting her clothes on fire and burning to death. Rafferty is not listed as having another spouse during his time living at and owning 15 Oak St.

Below: 1878 Springfield Daily Republican

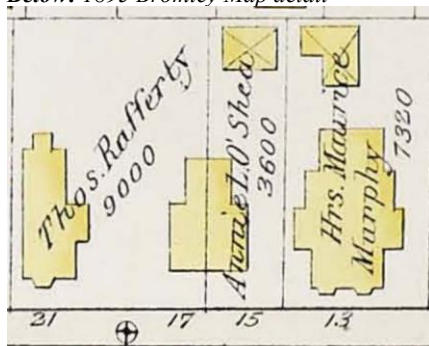
EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS.
Mrs Thomas Rafferty of Somerville set her clothes on fire last week, and was burned to death.

In the 1889 Somerville City Directory, William H O'Shea was listed as still occupying 15 Oak St and was listed, like the previous owner John O'Brien, as a grocer in Cambridge.

O'Shea William H., provisions (480 Cambridge, Cambridgeport), house 15 Oak, opp. Bolton

On the 1895 Bromley Map, Thomas Rafferty is listed as the owner of 15 Oak St and Annie L. O'Shea as the owner of 17 Oak St. Between 1874 and 1895, 21 Oak St was built on the same parcel as 15 Oak St and an accessory structure was built at the rear of Annie O'Shea's property at 17 Oak St.

Below: 1895 Bromley Map detail

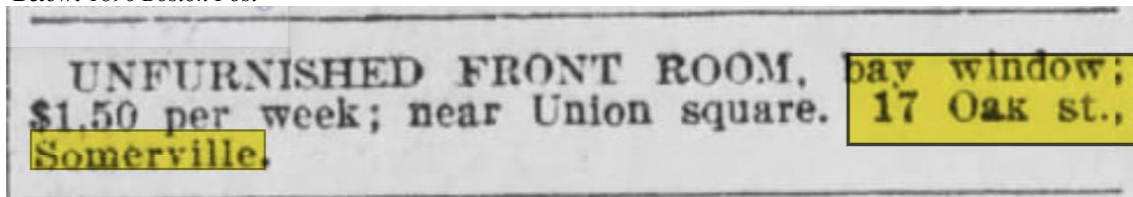


Below: 1895 Bromley Map



A room for rent for \$1.50 a week at 17 Oak St. was found in the 1896 *Boston Post*. This was likely advertised by the owner of 17 Oak St at the time, Tomas Rafferty. There were many articles advertising rooms and units in 15 & 17 Oak Street throughout the years as it was mainly occupied by renting tenants.

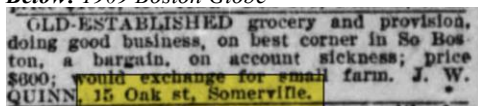
Below: 1896 Boston Post



After renting to the two units out for several years, Rafferty and O'Shea then sold the units to John R. Giles. In 1906 John R. Giles sold the property to Sam Greenwood. In 1907, Sam Greenwood sold one of the units of the property to Mary F Quinn and John W. Quinn. Greenwood sold the other unit of the building in 1910 to Helen A. Beary who, in turn, sold it that same year to the Quin family, giving them full ownership of the building.

John W. Quinn used the rear building as a barn for horses and carriages. He advertised horses for sale often in the *Boston Globe*. Quinn was also a grocer and owner of a store, which he advertised for sale in the *Boston Globe* in 1909.

Below: 1909 Boston Globe



According to the 1915 Somerville City Directory, John W. Quin and John Hughes were listed as residents of 15 Oak St and Gerred Ford was listed as a resident of 17 Oak St.

Below: 1915 Somerville City Directory

17 Charles H. Rogers
 15 John Hughes
 15 John W Quinn
 17 Gerred Ford

By 1919, new tenants of the building had moved into both units and John W. Quinn was still listed as a tenant at 15 Oak Street. Quinn was one of the few owners prior to the mid-20th century to both own and

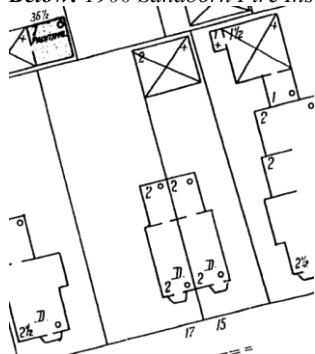
live in the home. Many of the tenants were short-term renters like Benjamin Durante, who was a Portuguese minister traveling around New England at the time.

Below: 1919 Somerville City Directory

15 Benjamin R Duarte
15 John W Quinn
17 Charles H Kane

There were more than 50 articles in the Boston Globe and other publications advertised John Quinn. These advertisements were for both the sale of horses and carriages and seeking young men to work with horses on the property. Sometime between 1900 and 1925, an expansion was built on the barn at the rear of 15 Oak St, likely due to the growth of Quinn's business.

Below: 1900 Sandborn Fire Insurance Map



Below: 1925 Sandborn Fire Insurance Map



In 1922, Mary F. Quinn & John W. Quinn sold 15 & 17 Oak St to William P. Brennick and Gerda M. Brennick. In 1933, William P. Brennick and Gerda M. Brennick sold the building to Marion L. Woodman.

Then in 1941, Marion L. Woodman sold 15 Oak to Alpeus G. Woodman and 17 Oak St to Ellen A. Dervan. 15 and 17 Oak St were then purchased by several members of the Medieros and Ober families until it was sold in 1971 to the Serpa family. The Serpas owned both 15 and 17 Oak St from 1971 to when it sold in 2025.

IV. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Please see the section immediately below which discusses location, design, materials and any alterations as the same information would be written here, just in longer form.

The National Park Service identifies historic integrity as the ability of a property to convey significance. A property should possess sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant; therefore, the following is an identification and evaluation of these qualities and alterations as they affect the ability of the subject property to convey significance.

The period of relevance for the house begins prior to 1874.

- a. Location: The structure is in its original location.
- b. Design: 2 ½-story front gabled, wood-framed structure with 2, 2-story bay windows on both sides of the front façade. Slightly steep pitched roof. The building is composed of main massing with subservient 2-story original rear section and a shed-roofed rear addition.
 Front elevation: 2 story stacked bay windows separated and topped with a cornice. 2 double hung windows on both sides of the gabled front.
 Right elevation: 2 1/2-story, gabled roof, concrete front-facing staircase with a small landing, iron railing, and entrance door to the 17 Oak st unit. 3 windows on the first floor with 3 stacked above on the second and a central window above the entrance. There is another set of front facing concrete stairs with iron railing leading to the entrance of the rear unit with 2 small windows on the original rear section and one in the addition on the second floor.
 Left elevation: 2 1/2-story, gabled roof, concrete side-facing staircase with a small landing, and an entrance door to the 15 Oak st unit. Windows symmetrically placed across main façade with 2 on either side of the main entrance and 3 on the second story. The rear section of the original structure has 2 basement windows, an entrance at ground level, and 2 windows on both the first and second story. 2 windows are stacked on the first and second floor of the rear addition.
 Rear elevation: Rear addition with shed roof; one window on the first floor, 2 on the second; original massing has a set of stairs with a rear entrance and wood railing; small window next to the rear entrance and a window of the second floor; window on the 2 ½ floor is facing the rear.
- c. Materials: Raux stone siding on front elevation,; concrete steps with iron rails and balusters on the left and right entrances; concrete foundation; wood railing and balusters at rear entrance; asphalt shingling on roof; brick chimneys; wood doors; window material unknown; vinyl siding on all sides but the front facade.

- d. Alterations: Siding has been replaced with different materials along all sides; windows have been replaced; 2 story rear addition with shed roof; altered from a 2 unit building to a 4 unit.

V. FINDINGS

For a Determination of Significance, the subject building must be found either (i) importantly associated with people, events or history and/or (ii) historically or architecturally significant. The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) must make these findings. The portions of the Demolition Review Ordinance (DRO) related to these findings are included below:

A. HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

1. The HPC must make a finding as to whether or not the structure at 15 & 17 Oak Street meets any of the criteria stated above.
2. The HPC must specifically state why the structure at 15 & 17 Oak Street does or does not meet the threshold for historic significance under finding “i”.
- 3.

B. HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The findings for historical and/or architectural significance of a historic property address the period, style, method of building construction and association with a reputed architect or builder of the subject property, either by itself or in the context of a group of buildings or structures, and therefore it is in the public interest to be preserved or rehabilitated rather than to be demolished.

1. The HPC must make a finding as to whether or not the structure at 15 & 17 Oak Street meets any of the criteria stated above.
2. The HPC must specifically state why the structure at 15 & 17 Oak Street does or does not meet the threshold for historic significance under finding “ii”.

VI. VOTE

When bringing the matter to a vote, the HPC must include the reasons why the structure at 15 & 17 Oak Street is or is not “historically significant”.