



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

MICHAEL F. GLAVIN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DETERMINATION OF SIGNIFICANCE STAFF REPORT

Site: 217 Somerville Avenue
Case: HPC 2018.012
Applicant Name: George Moussallem
Date of Application: February 14, 2018
Recommendation: Significant
Hearing Date: March 20, 2018

I. Historical Association

Historical Context: See Form B

Architectural Description: See Form B

Summary: Greek immigrants constructed this building for their church. It was subsequently bought by the American Legion who used it. Both of these organizations served as the hearts of their communities.

Findings on Historical Association

*For a Determination of Significance, the subject building must be found either (a) **importantly associated with people, events or history** or (b) historically or architecturally significant (Ordinance 2003-05, Section 2.17.B). Findings for (b) are at the end of the next section.*

(a) In accordance with the historic information obtained from *Findings on Historical Association*, which utilizes historic maps/atlas, City reports and directories, and building permit research, and through an examination of resources that document the history of the City, such as *Somerville Past and Present*, Staff find 217 Somerville Avenue to be 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.

The subject building is found importantly associated with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City due to associations with the religious life of the Greek immigrant



community from 1925 to the mid-1950s when they built a new much grander church on Central Street; and association with the American Legion Post 447, an organization composed primarily of World War II and Korean War veterans.

II. Historical and 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 (Ordinance 2003-05, Section 2.17.B).

The period of significance for 217 Somerville Avenue begins with its construction as a Greek Orthodox Church in 1923 and continues through today as a center of community life for World War II and Korean War veterans of the American Legion.

Integrity

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.

- a. *Location:* The building has not been moved; it is set on a major local arterial within a densely developed neighborhood which still has many ties to the Greek immigrants who arrived at the beginning of the 20th century. This building is one of several that are being considered in this neighborhood as part of a Local Historic District and is located at key intersection.
- b. *Design:* The church structure is a simple rectangle with decorative buttresses and an apse. Many of the original details may be extant beneath the siding and interior paneling.
- c. *Materials:* The building is wood-frame construction with vinyl siding encapsulating much of the building.
- d. *Alterations:* According to the building permits, a balcony was added in 1935 to the front of the building and in 1940 offices were added to the rear. In 1945 a stucco wall was removed and filled. Finally the building was sided with vinyl in 1977. This resulted in numerous blocked windows and a simplification of the decorative aspects of the building that are shown in the historic sketch.

Evaluation of Integrity: The building retains its integrity of form and massing. The neighborhood has not substantially changed since its construction.

Findings for Historical and Architectural Significance

*For a Determination of Significance, the subject building must be found either (a) importantly associated with people, events or history or (b) **historically or architecturally significant** (Ordinance 2003-05, Section 2.17.B). Findings for (a) can be found at the end of the previous section.*

(b) In accordance with the *Finding on Historical and Architectural Significance*, which addresses period, style, method of building construction, and association with a reputed architect or builder,

either by itself or in the context of a group of buildings or structures, as well as integrity, which assess the ability of the property to convey significance, Staff find 217 Somerville Avenue historically or architecturally significant.

The subject building is found historically and architecturally significant due to associations with a reputed architect, William A. Dykeman. The building retains its integrity as a structure constructed for religious purposes despite the simplification of the form.

III. Recommendation

Recommendations are based upon an analysis by Historic Preservation Staff of the permit application and the required findings for the Demolition Review Ordinance, which requires archival and historical research, and an assessment of historical and architectural significance, conducted prior to the public meeting for a Determination of Significance. This report may be revised or updated with a new recommendation and/or findings based upon additional information provided to Staff or through further research.

For a Determination of Significance, the structure must be either (A) listed on the National Register or (B) at least 50 years old.

(A) The structure is NOT listed on or within an area listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor is the structure the subject of a pending application for listing on the National Register.

OR

(B) The structure, circa 1925, is at least 50 years old.

AND

For a Determination of Significance under (B), the subject building must be found either (a) importantly associated with people, events or history or (b) historically or architecturally significant.

- (a) In accordance with the *Findings on Historical Association*, which utilizes historic maps/atlas, City reports and directories, and building permit research, and through an examination of resources that document the history of the City, **Staff recommend that the Historic Preservation Commission find 217 Somerville Avenue 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.**

This building is in a grouping that is being considered for a Local Historic District status and is centrally located at key intersection. The period of significance for 217 Somerville Avenue begins with its construction as a Greek Orthodox Church in 1923 and continues through today as a center of community life for World War II and Korean War veterans of the American Legion.

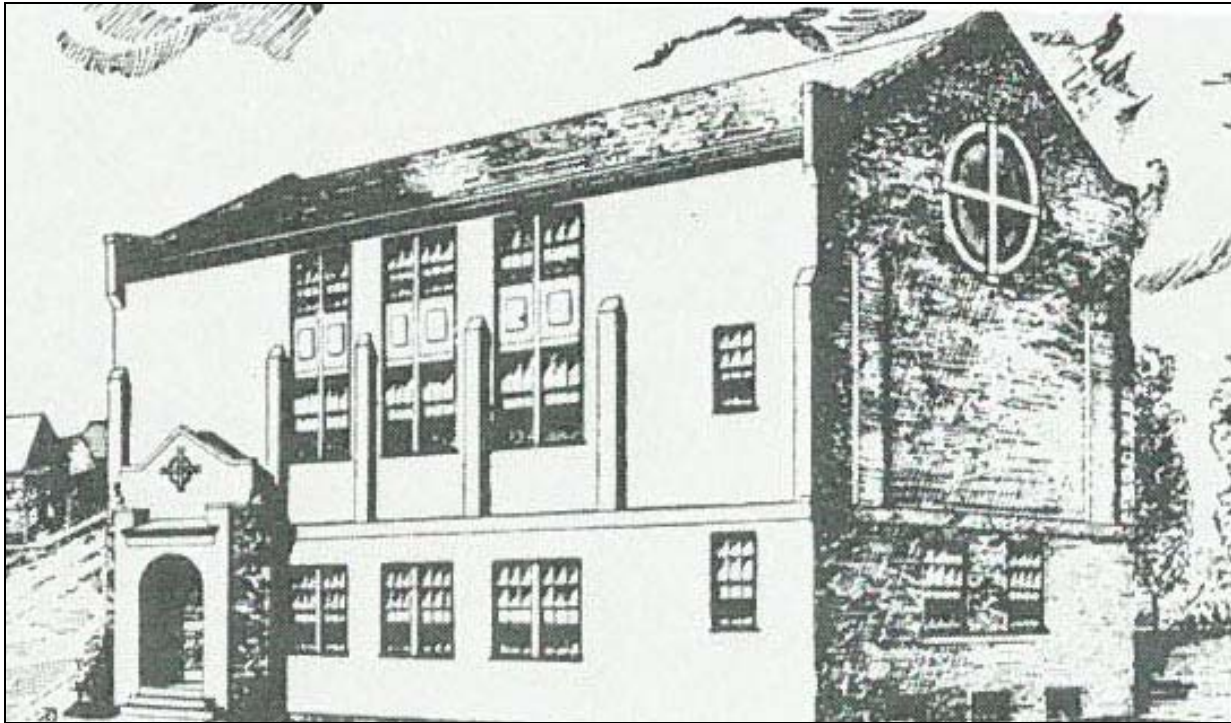
The subject building is found importantly associated with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City due to associations with the religious life of the Greek immigrant community from 1925 to the mid-1950s when they built a new much grander church on Central Street; and association with the American Legion Post 447, an organization composed primarily of World War II and Korean War veterans.

OR

- (b) In accordance with the *Findings on Historical and Architectural Significance*, which addresses period, style, method of building construction, and association with a reputed architect or builder, either by itself or in the context of a group of buildings or structures, as well as integrity, the ability to convey significance, **Staff recommend that the Historic Preservation Commission find 217 Somerville Avenue historically and architecturally significant.**

The subject building is found historically and architecturally significant due to associations with a reputed architect, William A. Dykeman. The building retains its integrity as a structure constructed for religious purposes despite the simplification of the form.





Historic sketch of the Church







Wedding in 217 Somerville Avenue – 1950s



Reception in 217 Somerville Avenue



American Legion Function Room – top floor



American Legion Function Room – ground floor

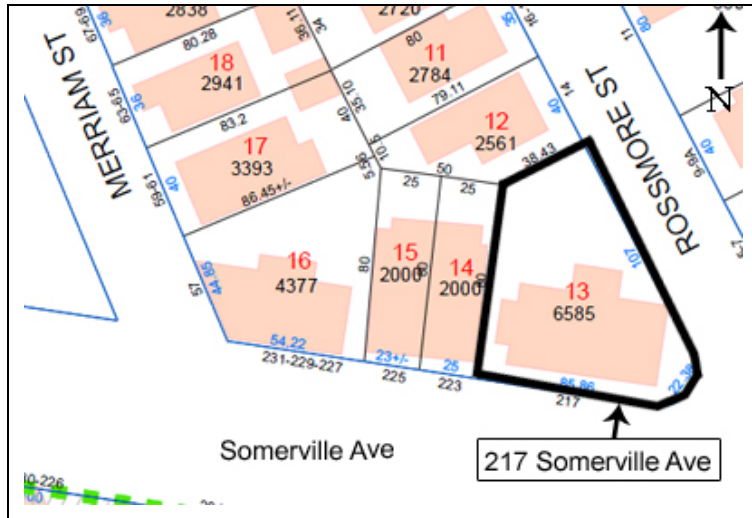
FORM B – BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Photograph



Locus Map



Recorded by: V. Adams, G. Pineo, C. Barry, M. Andrade;
PAL

Organization: City of Somerville, OSPCD, Planning
Division

Date: May 2016

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

81-C-13

Boston
North

SMV.G

SMV.1413

Town/City: Somerville

Place: (*neighborhood or village*): Union Square

Address: 217 Somerville Avenue

Historic Name: Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Greek Orthodox Church

Uses: Present: Clubhouse

Original: Church

Date of Construction: 1923

Source: Church history, building inspection record

Style/Form: No style

Architect/Builder: William A. Dykeman/Liberty General
Contracting

Exterior Material:

Foundation: Concrete

Wall/Trim: Vinyl

Roof: Asphalt shingle

Outbuildings/Secondary Structures: None

Major Alterations (*with dates*): Fenestration pattern
altered mid- to late 20th century; vinyl siding and windows
added late 20th century.

Condition: Fair

Moved: no ☒ yes ☐ **Date:**

Acreage: 0.15

Setting: This building sits on the northwest corner of
Somerville Avenue and Rossmore Street, and faces
southwest. It is within a densely developed urban
neighborhood, surrounded by residential and commercial
buildings.

INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

SOMERVILLE

217 Somerville Avenue

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

SMV.G

SMV.1413

☐ Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

217 Somerville Avenue is an irregularly shaped lot at the northwest corner of Somerville Avenue and Rossmore Street. The property consists of a former Greek Orthodox church, now used as an American Legion hall. The building is sited near the southwestern property boundary, and is surrounded with grass. An asphalt parking lot fills the north portion of the property.

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church (SMV.1413) at 217 Somerville Avenue is an astylistic, four-bay, three-story, wood-frame building with an asymmetric southwest (facade) elevation. The building has a rectangular plan, is seated on a concrete foundation, and is topped with a side gable roof. A one-and-one-half-story entrance bay topped with a triangular pediment projects off the west bay of the southwest elevation. The main entrance, consisting of a pair of steel doors, is set within a deep arch in the middle of the entrance bay. Two paired windows are in the second story of the facade elevation. Fenestration in the few openings in the building consists of one-over-one, double-hung vinyl replacement sash. The walls are clad vinyl siding, and the roof is clad with asphalt shingles. A two-story, curved bay, topped with a hip roof, projects from the center of the northwest elevation. A two-bay-wide, two-story addition with a one-bay, one-story addition to the west, both topped with a shed roof, projects off the northwest elevation. A secondary entrance is in the northeast bay of the northern addition. The building retains little external evidence of its former use as a church, with the exception of the curved bay, which likely housed the nave. The fenestration pattern was likely changed in the mid- to late 20th century, after the building was taken over by the American Legion. In the late 20th century the building was clad with vinyl siding and windows were replaced with vinyl.

This building was once one of two churches at the intersection of Somerville Avenue and Rossmore Street, the other being 203 Somerville Avenue (SMV.1412), which was formerly the Trinity Italian Presbyterian Church, and is now the Somerville Sports Club.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Union Square is the oldest and largest commercial area in Somerville, and its growth is tied to the residential and commercial growth of the City. Since the 17th century, the area has been the site of commercial establishments serving travelers and tradespeople. Transportation improvements in the early part of the 19th century enabled further development in the area to support the rapidly growing population. Following the Civil War, local entrepreneurs established lucrative businesses in the Square and constructed numerous ambitious buildings. By the early 20th century, Union Square was a critical hub for automobile traffic, and it continued to develop commercially, adding auto-related enterprises to the mix. Today Union Square is one of two major commercial centers in Somerville, along with Davis Square, consisting primarily of locally owned restaurants, shops, and professional offices.

The building at 217 Somerville Avenue first appears on the 1933–1934 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map as the Hellenic Orthodox Church. The first Greek Orthodox Church in Somerville was located at 5 Bow Street, with services held in a rented hall. An increase in Greek immigrants settling in Somerville led the community to construct a proper Greek Orthodox Church. The church, designed by Boston architect William A. Dykeman, was constructed and dedicated in 1923. Following World War II, the building became too small to accommodate the growing congregation, and by 1948, the church community had left the building, which was acquired by American Legion Post 447 by 1950. The building was clad with vinyl siding and the fenestration altered after the American Legion took possession of the building. The building continues to be used by the American Legion (Dormition of the Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, Greenough 1929, 1933, 1940; Massachusetts State Archives; Sanborn 1933, 1950).

William A. Dykeman (1872–1949), a Boston architect with a home in the Winter Hill neighborhood of Somerville, designed numerous single family and apartment dwellings in the greater Boston area, including a group of single family homes for developer Jason S. Bailey in West Roxbury (Jason S. Bailey Houses, BOS.10655, BOS.10684, BOS.10685, and BOS.10686),

INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

SOMERVILLE

217 Somerville Avenue

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

SMV.G

SMV.1413

and large apartment buildings in Brockton (The Checkerton, BRO.95 and The Chesston, BRO.94). He was also responsible for the design of the building for the Somerville Historical Society, SMV.14, at 1 Westwood Road (Find A Grave 2016).

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INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

SOMERVILLE

217 Somerville Avenue

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

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| SMV.G | SMV.1413 |
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PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo 2. Southeast and southwest elevations, looking north.

Metropolis of Boston

Dormition of the Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church

Somerville, MA

Parish History

The first Greek Orthodox Church of Somerville, located at 5 Bow Street, was a rented hall over the old Woolworth building in Union Square. Although the interior of the hall/church was very simply appointed, it served well the early Greek settlers in Somerville – most of whom had arrived from the village of Alatsata in Asia Minor. The official name of the Church community was “Hellenic Association of Somerville, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.” The Church was supported solely through the donations of its membership – dues were set at 50 cents per month. The year was 1916.

The destruction and burnings of the cities and villages of Asia Minor in 1922 caused the Greek people of Somerville to realize that returning to their birthplace would not happen as originally planned. This fact, along with the increasing number of immigrants, helped them determine to erect a true Greek Orthodox edifice as their place of worship. With the approval of a General Assembly of the membership, several adjoining lots were purchased and 217 Somerville Avenue became the Church's permanent home. Dedication Day in 1923 was the fulfillment of a dream for the early settlers. These newly arrived immigrants – in this country no more than a few years – had managed to eke out a living and to have enough money left over to build their own church.

In 1939, when World War II had begun and more people were attracted to Church, it became apparent that they were outgrowing the parish and a decision had to be made to either expand the structure or purchase a new building. In 1940, however, plans for the new church were suspended when the Mussolini invaded Greece in November; the energies of the parishioners now flowed into the Greek War Relief Activities. Eventually, Red Cross work became the main activity of the Community between 1942 and 1945 and fund raising was done by the Philoptohos Society (women's auxiliary) and the rest of the Community.

The war years' activities and the growth of the Community were making it very evident to those entrusted with the administration of the Church that additional quarters were necessary to accommodate the parishioners. In 1944 a Buffet Dinner Dance launched a new fund drive for a new location. This affair was held, by coincidence, at the Elks Hall at 29 Central Street. While funds were being raised, it became known to the Community that this location was coming up for sale. Although these buildings did not resemble a Greek Orthodox Church architecturally, the basic facilities and the buildings themselves could serve the Community's needs very easily. There were areas for classrooms, committee rooms and offices; an apartment was also available for the priest and his

family. With the General Assembly's approval, the Committee purchased in 1947 the property known as the Columbus Tyler estate. Tyler had built this beautiful Central Street home for his new bride, Mary Sawyer, of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" fame, who came from Worcester. The property was originally landscaped with rare trees and shrubs, many of which were imported from other lands. In 1922 the estate became the home of the Somerville Elks until it was purchased by the Greek Church Community for \$32,000. The Building Committee was soon devoting every free minute to the extensive remodeling and refurbishing of the building. On April 15, 1948, an "Agiasmo" (blessing) of the new Church took place along with the first Divine Liturgy, to which all parishioners attended. How glad and proud were the hearts of Somerville's Hellenes! A new vitality seemed to descend upon the Community and love and enthusiasm abounded.

By 1958, however, it became apparent that major renovations would have to be undertaken. The building with the classrooms, offices and clergy apartment was over 100 years old, water leaks were evident, ceilings were in need of repair and the top floors had been closed off. A professional evaluation was completed and the recommendation was to raze the old structure and erect a new building. The Community was at the crossroads of a great undertaking. The cost of constructing and completely furnishing a new edifice would cost nearly \$350,000.

Razing of the old structure took place on June 27, 1965, and construction began. On October 2, 1966 – Dedication Day – proud parishioners of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary Church stood and gazed at the new Educational and Social Center, their "Community Center." (At the recent Archdiocesan Clergy-Laity Congress, it was recommended that "Dormition" replace "Assumption" since Dormition is a more accurate translation of "Koimosis," which means "the falling asleep.")

In the 1980s capital improvements were deemed necessary and the upcoming work schedule was planned. Just as construction of a new narthex, choir loft, kitchen and classroom was completed, a fire damaged the narthex; after its repair, the narthex was dedicated on August 14, 1987. The next phase – a new iconostasion and altar area, major icons, central air conditioning and parking lot improvements – was completed in time for one of the most important religious events the Church had experienced – its consecration, which took place on October 20, 1991. Hundreds of parishioners and friends were filled with the joyous satisfaction of knowing that their beloved Church was now consecrated.

Many changes have occurred in the composition of the Church Community. Most of the pioneers and many of their immediate successors have left for the heavenly homeland. Their children have grown, moved to the suburbs and have joined local Greek Orthodox Churches, often offering to them their talents and the "expertise" they gained in this Community. At the same time, new immigrants from Greece and other locales plus many converts to Orthodoxy have joined the Church family.

The Community is following its historical course. On Sunday mornings, week days and evenings and on holy days, one will see the Church, St. Catherine's Chapel or the Community Center humming with activity. The pioneers of our Somerville Community would shed tears of joy and pride in seeing

their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren continuing their course and carrying the beacon of Hellenism and Orthodoxy that was passed to them so many years ago.

http://www.dormitionchurch.org/our_parish/parish_history accessed 3/12/2018