



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

Joseph A. Curtatone

Mayor

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

KRISTENNA CHASE, *PRESERVATION PLANNER*
SARAH WHITE, *PLANNER & PRESERVATION PLANNER*

Case #: HPC 2018.012

Date: April 17, 2018

Recommendation: Preferably Preserved

PRESERVATION STAFF REPORT
for
Determination of Preferably Preserved

Site: 217 Somerville Avenue

Applicant Name: George Moussallem

Applicant Address: 18 Stults Road, Belmont, MA 02478

Owner Name: Somerville Memorial Post No. 447

Owner Address: 217 Somerville Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143

Petition: Applicant seeks to demolish the 1923 Church/Clubhouse at 217 Somerville Avenue.



HPC Hearing Date: April 17, 2018

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** The subject property is a c.1923 Greek Orthodox Church now American Legion Post 447.
2. **Proposal:** The Applicant seeks to demolish the existing structure. The Applicant has concerns that he may not be able to save the structure for which he does not yet have particular plans but would like to have the flexibility to demolish the building if necessary. He has submitted a structural engineer's report noting the building's deficiencies.

I. MEETING SUMMARY: Determination of Significance

On Tuesday, March 20, 2018, the Historic Preservation Commission voted unanimously (5-0) to determine the c. 1925 wood-frame building at 217 Somerville Avenue 'Significant' because the building, per Section 2.17.B of the Demolition Review Ordinance 2003-05, is "at least 50 years old, and is or has been determined by the Commission to be a significant building or structure after a finding that the building or structure is either:

- i. "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, or
- ii. "Historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of building construction, or association with a reputed architect or builder) 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."

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 by Greek immigrants and continues through today as a center of community life for World War II and Korean War veterans of the American Legion Post 447.

The Commission found **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.

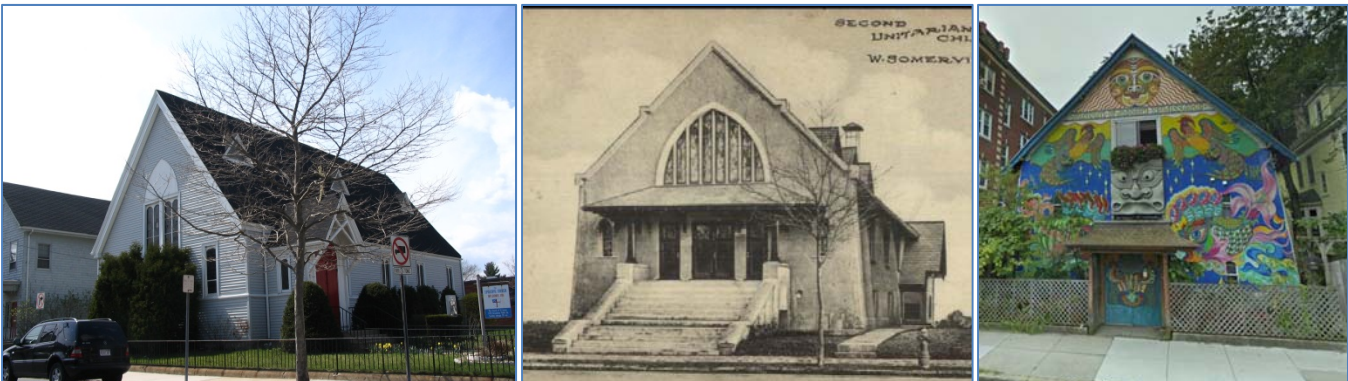
The subject building is found historically and architecturally significant due to associations with a reputed architect, William A. Dykeman. The building retains its integrity as a structure constructed for religious purposes despite the simplification of the form due to the application of the vinyl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

II. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

A structural engineer's report has been received concerning the existing conditions.

Comparable Structures:

This type of modest 2 ½ story wood-frame church has few equivalents within the City.



1170 Broadway, St. James Episcopal Church c. 1876 (LHD); 115 College Avenue, 2nd Unitarian Church c. 1910 then and now Museum of the Modern Renaissance.



277 Broadway, Broadway Methodist Episcopal Church c. 1882 now Elizabeth Peabody House; 203 Somerville Avenue, Trinity Italian Presbyterian Church c. 1920, now Portuguese Sporting Club

II. PREFERABLY PRESERVED

If the Commission determines that the demolition of the significant building or structure would be detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City, such building or structure shall be considered a preferably preserved building or structure. (Ordinance 2003-05, Section 4.2.d)

A determination regarding if the demolition of the subject building is detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City should consider the following:

How does this building or structure compose or reflect features which contribute to the heritage of the City?

a) *What is the remaining integrity of the structure? The National Park Service defines integrity as the ability of a property to convey significance.*

- The exterior of the structure (the only portion of the building within the purview of the HPC), retains a high degree of architectural integrity and reflects the evolution of this property (vinyl cladding aside, which is easily removed). See determination of significance for a summary of the historic architectural features of this structure.

What is the level (local, state, national) of significance?

- 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 by Greek immigrants and continues through today as a center of community life for World War II and Korean War veterans of the American Legion Post 447.
- The Commission found **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.

- 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 due to the application of the vinyl siding and the possible removal of some elements of the structure.
- b) *What is the visibility of the structure with regard to public interest (Section 2.17.B.ii) if demolition were to occur?*
- The structure is located on Somerville Avenue, a major local road.
- c) *What is the scarcity or frequency of this type of resource in the City?*
- The building is unusual due the rarity of wood churches of this scale within the City. The Roman Catholic Churches constructed by immigrants to the city were mostly of a larger scale, constructed after the communities had become more established and replaced the earlier wood structures as has this building where the congregation bought and built a more substantial structure. Among the examples of comparable church buildings, only one was found that is still used as a church. The others have found other ways to serve the Somerville communities.

Upon a consideration of the above criteria is the demolition of the subject building detrimental to the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social heritage of the City?

Staff finds that this type of wood-frame church with stucco casing (beneath the vinyl) to be a rare example of an immigrant church, constructed in the early days of the groups arrival in Somerville.

III. RECOMMENDATION

*Based on the information provided and an assessment of the building, Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission finds the property at 217 Somerville Avenue to be **PREFERABLY PRESERVED**.*