



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 2017.072
Date: October 24, 2017

Recommendation: Preferably Preserved

PRESERVATION STAFF REPORT
FOR
DETERMINATION OF PREFERABLY PRESERVED

Site: 251 Highland Avenue

Applicant Name: Cheung Kwan Yu
Applicant Address: 128 Lincoln St., Ste. 1101, Boston, MA 02111

Owner Name: Cheung Kwan Yu et al
Owner Address: 249 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143



Petition: Applicant seeks to demolish the existing structure.

HPC Hearing Date: October 27, 2017

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** This *ca.* 1895 house has been home to a number of working class and middle class owners. The addition of a storefront in 1911 changed the character of the house, bringing the building closer to the street and making it less domestic. This type of alteration was made to homes located near transportation lines where the clientele would be able to pick up needed goods on their way home. Other houses in this block also have similar alterations.
2. **Proposal:** The Applicant seeks demolish the existing structure to make way for a new building.

II. MEETING SUMMARY: Determination of Significance

On Tuesday, September 26, 2017, the Historic Preservation Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to determine the c. 1895 wood-frame dwelling at Highland Avenue ‘Significant’ because the building, per *Section 2.17.B - The structure is at least 50 years old;*

and

- (i) *The structure is 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;*

and

- (ii) *The structure is 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.*

The Commission found **251 Highland Avenue** importantly associated with the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of the City. It is particularly associated with the development of Highland Avenue as an important residential and commercial corridor.

This ca. 1895 house at **251 Highland Avenue** has been home to a number of working class and middle class owners. The addition of a storefront in 1911 changed the character of the house, bringing the building closer to the street and making it less domestic. This type of alteration was made to homes located near transportation lines where the clientele would be able to pick up needed goods on their way home. Other houses in this block also have similar alterations. The number of small retail shops along this section of Highland Avenue indicates that this was a major node of local commerce for those commuting to and from Boston by streetcar

The Commission also found **251 Highland Avenue** historically and architecturally significant in the context of a group of buildings. The building bears strong architectural relationships to other nearby buildings on the block constructed circa 1895 where every other house has an added storefront and where ground floor retail can also be found on larger scale buildings of later construction.

II. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Comparable Structures:

As shown on the maps, several houses along Highland Avenue have applied storefronts. The other variation of raising the building up a story and inserting a floor-through retail and storage space was less frequent on this thoroughfare. They share the same basic massing but with variations due to the topography, differentiation by the developer and the changing tastes of owners over time. Circular turrets are more common than the diagonal bay used in these buildings.

Comparable structures within the City include, but not limited to:

Embedded behind storefront:

- 233 Highland Avenue
- 241 Highland Avenue

Raised above storefront:

- 52 Summer Street
- Medford Street at Magoun Square

No storefront:

- 28 Summer Street



- 9 Aldersey Street,
- 7 & 9 Chapel Street



241 Highland Avenue, 233 Highland Avenue



52 Summer Street, Medford Street at Magoun Square



28 Summer Street, 9 Aldersey Street, 7 & 9 Chapel Street

III. 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 through key eras of architectural change (asbestos shingles aside, which is easily removed).

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

- This structure is significantly associated with the nationally known poet and writer Sam Walter Foss who was also the City Librarian in the 1890s and early 20th century. The largest park in the city is named for his son, Saxton Conant Foss and one of the editors of the Somerville Journal, May Pillsbury. Even today, his poems are regularly read to mark historic city occasions.
- This structure historically and architecturally significant due to their relationship to the streetscape and its place within a group of similarly important buildings and due to its building style – Queen Anne, which is emblematic of the period in which it was constructed and as one of several similarly-designed buildings within the neighborhood.

b) What is the visibility of the structure with regard to public interest (Section 2.17.B.ii) if demolition were to occur?

- Highland Avenue is a major local artery. The house is located among several similar buildings, some of who have c. 1910-1920 storefronts. There is a rhythm of gable roofs and low facades along the street interrupted by small front yards on the north side of the avenue. Removing the building would alter the rhythm.

c) What is the scarcity or frequency of this type of resource in the City?

- The City of Somerville has a large number of Queen Anne style buildings retaining varying degrees of architectural integrity. However, no other house has such strong associations with such a well-loved poet of the time.

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?

The Applicant's proposal to demolish the house would be detrimental to the cultural heritage of the City. Sam Walter Foss and his family continue to have relevance to the modern world.

III. RECOMMENDATION

*Based on the information provided and an assessment of the building, Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission finds the property at 251 Highland Avenue to be **PREFERABLY PRESERVED**.*

