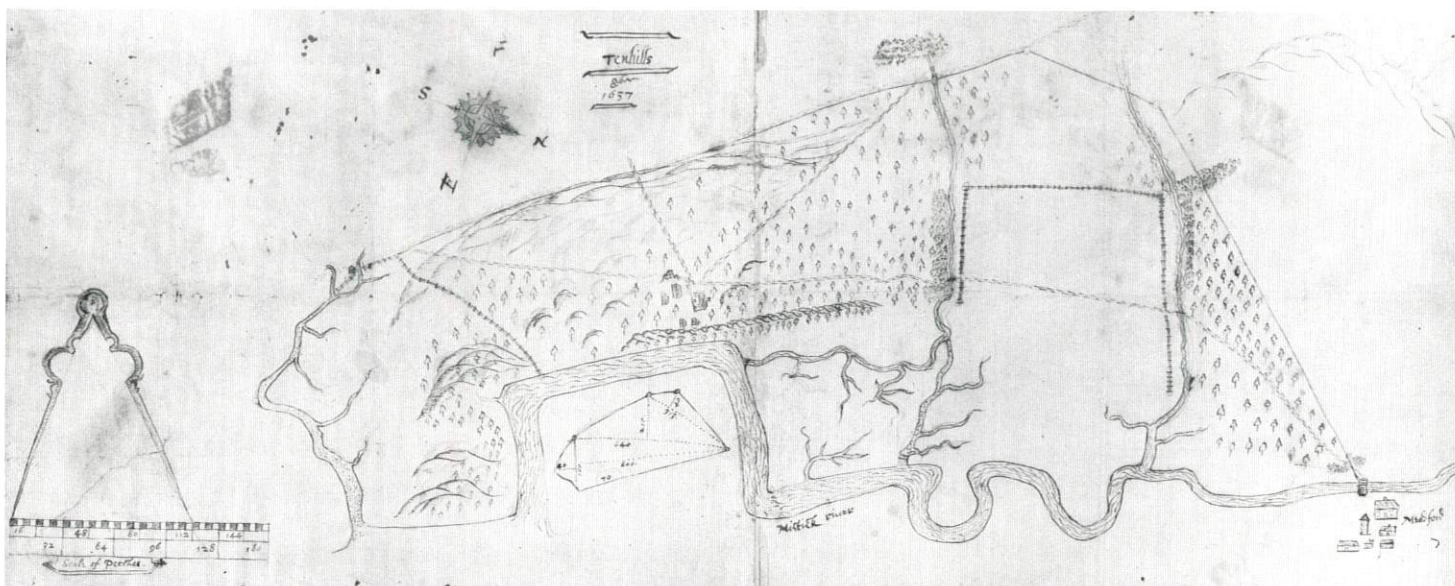


## Charlestown Beyond the Neck and its Buildings

This chapter provides an overview of the development of Somerville—between settlement in the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century—as understood through its architecture. A discussion of architectural styles and building types accompanies the historical narrative. Historical photographs assist in understanding the chronology of styles and building types, particularly because many of Somerville's important early buildings have been razed. In this chapter, the city is discussed as a whole. In Chapter Three, ten distinct areas of the city are analyzed in more detail. (The Index is useful for locating a particular building by address; the Glossary provides definitions of unfamiliar architectural terms.)



**Map of Ten Hills Farm, 1637.** One of the earliest maps made in New England described the land of Governor John Winthrop in present-day Somerville and Medford, along the Mystic River.

## The Land



Marsh grass at Mystic River, Shore Drive.

. . . very beautiful in open lands, mixed with goodly woods, and again open plains, in some places 500 acres, some places more, some less, not much troublesome for to clear for the plough to go in; no place barren but on the tops of the hills. The grass and weeds grow up to a man's face in the lowlands, and by fresh river abundance of grass and large meadows, without any tree or shrub to hinder the sycthe. . . .

*Charlestown surveyor Thomas Greaves, 1629*

. . . Somerville is perhaps more finely situated for pleasant and healthy residence than any city in the neighborhood of Boston. It contains more high ground than any other suburb. . . .

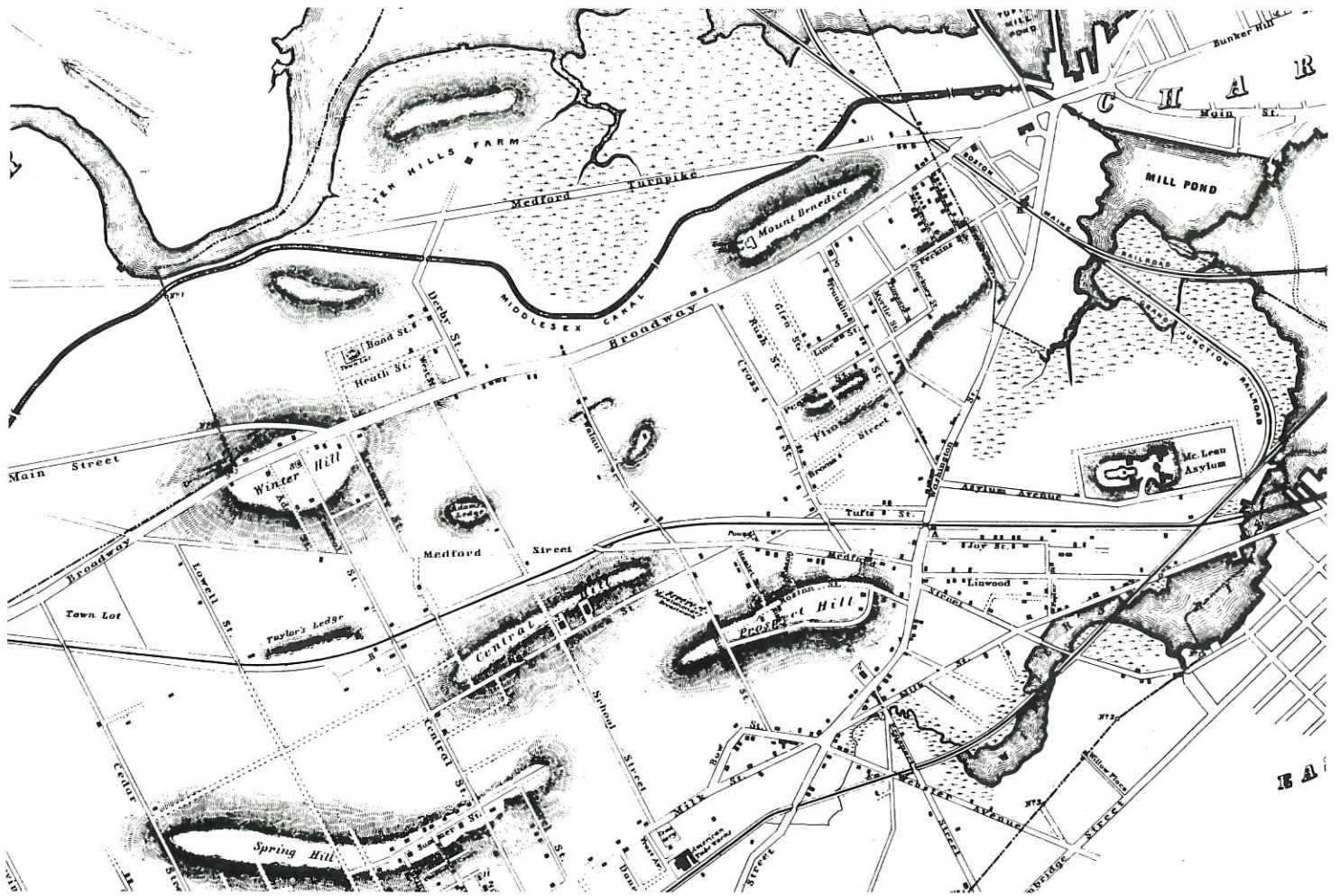
*Boston Post, 1882*

Somerville's 2800 acres (approximately 4.1 square miles) are located in one of the oldest settled areas of Massachusetts, two miles from Boston. A part of the geological region known as the Boston Basin, Somerville's topography is largely the result of the action of glacial ice sheets and floods 14,000 to 15,000 years ago.

Somerville is situated on bedrock formed during the Pre-Cambrian period about 600 million years ago. The earliest geological maps made of the Somerville area (by S. L. and J. F. Dana) in 1818 identified the bedrock as argillite. Outcroppings of this blue or brownish gray bedrock (also known as Cambridge Mudstone or Somerville Slate) are evident throughout the city. In addition to many small ledges visible in backyards and along major routes such as Broadway and Somerville Avenue, there are two major outcroppings at Mystic Street near the Mystic Housing Project, and at Quarry Hill, the site of the Powderhouse. Somerville has thousands of dikes, or igneous intrusions, which cut across surrounding rocks. These dikes were once molten lava flows, and range in width from fractions of an inch to many feet. Quarry Hill is on a 500-foot wide dike of diabase which extends three miles from the Middlesex Fells into Somerville. Another outcropping of this diabase exists at the prominent ledge on Granite Street. In the 1890s, the Granite Street quarry also was a source of specimens of prehnite, a rare mineral. Gold and silver were found in minute quantities in some veins of Somerville dikes. A "Gold Mine" was established at Willow Avenue and Fosket Street for a brief time in the late nineteenth century.

Medford diabase outcropping, Quarry Hill, Nathan Tufts Park.





Drumlins and the Miller's River. From the 1852 Draper Map of Somerville.

A series of smooth hills, or drumlins, of ground moraine or subglacial till are situated along the prominent ridge between Quarry Hill and the Charlestown peninsula. Formed by the movement of glacial ice or as a result of melting waters from the Wisconsin glacier, they mark the division between the watersheds of the Mystic River at the north and the Charles River at the south. The highest is 140' Walnut Tree or College Hill, bordering Medford. Other prominent drumlins are 135' Winter Hill, 105' Central Hill and 130' Spring Hill. The smaller drumlins of Winthrop Hill, Cobble Hill, and Mount Benedict were cut down and used to fill marshes and the Miller's River in 1874. Prospect Hill, now 115 feet, was cut down from an elevation of approximately 125 feet and also used to fill the Miller's River in Ward II.

Somerville's soils range from well-drained sandy loam in the western upland section to dense claylands in the Mystic River watershed (Ten Hills) and near the former swamps of Ward II. Ward II is part of the Cambridge plain, a great flood plain of glacial age which fills the lower valley of the Charles River from Watertown to the Back Bay.

Somerville's Boston Blue clay deposits were formed 14,000-15,000 years ago and contain fossilized shells of the salt-water *Leda* clam. The extensive beds were formed with the retreat of the glacier, when 25 feet of water covered the Boston Basin. When the waters receded, the claylands rebounded with forest, which later turned into a layer of peat. When Somerville was settled by white men, the clay was exposed only near streams or tidal creeks. It was covered by a thin layer of soil, and was easily excavated. Settlers found marshes at the eastern, southern, and northern edges of the Charlestown main-

land, and meadowland and grassland interrupted by marsh and western edge bordered by Alewife Brook. The entire tract between the Neck and Alewife Brook was largely unforested.

Two rivers border Somerville, and create the narrow neck between Charlestown and Somerville. The Mystic River at the north forms a portion of the city's northern boundary with Medford. The Miller's River, a tributary of the Charles, formerly cut a deep inlet and drained Somerville's marshes at the south. The first settlers found at least seven streams, most originating from the Mystic River.

Topography and natural resources such as clay deposits and outcroppings of bedrock have determined the location of industries and residential districts. The majority of manufacturing and processing establishments located in the lowlands near the Mystic River, and the residential sections adhered to the slopes of the hills.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth century dairy farms are documented on Prospect, Winter, and Spring Hills, and in West Somerville near Alewife Brook. The upland soil of West Somerville was well-suited for grazing, and later in the nineteenth century, for market gardening. In Ward II, Ten Hills, and the Powderhouse area, glacial clay deposits were extensively excavated for the manufacture of bricks and pottery. Beginning in the seventeenth century, outcroppings of bedrock were quarried for foundation stone, fenceposts, and headstones. Somerville stone was used for the next two centuries for walls and foundations, and in a few cases, for the construction of buildings. A stone-crushing industry developed in the late nineteenth century to supply gravel for road-building.

Large-scale filling and the subsequent construction of build-

**Quarrymen!  
Contractors!**

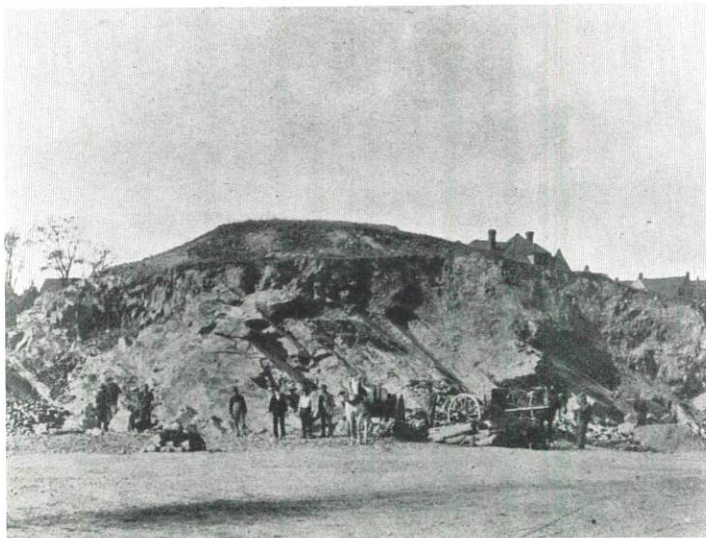
The well-known quarry of Somerville limestone, situated off Myrtle Avenue, near Temple Street, for many years past operated by Messrs. McCarthy & Buttiner, is for rent. The ledge has been worked for fifty years and is inexhaustible. It has a good face-wall from fifty to one hundred feet high. Besides the limestone for building purposes, there are quantities of hard rock suitable for roads. Only responsible parties need apply.

**ELLSWORTH FISKE,**  
41 Heath Street, - - - Somerville, my13-St.

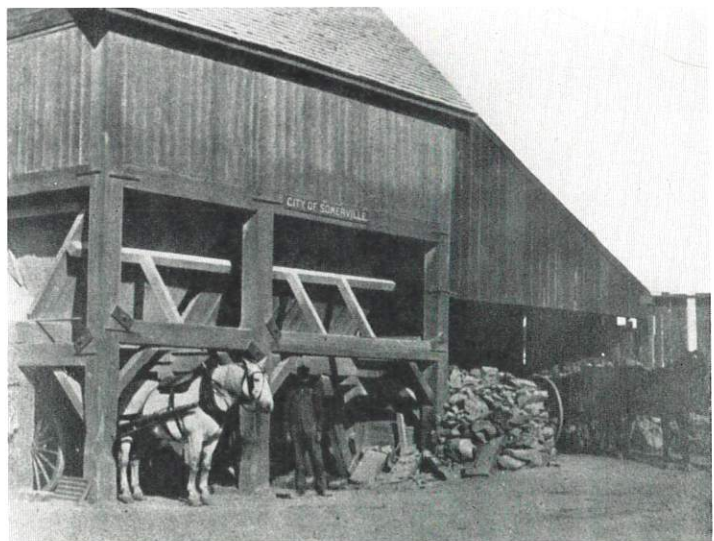
ings have changed this early nineteenth century land use pattern. In the 1840s, farmers sold some of their pasture land to be stripped for brickyards. Later, with the decline of the brick industry, this land was filled and used for building lots. Similarly marshes in the Ward II and Ten Hills areas were filled, often for the construction of tenements. It is not surprising that today residents of the former "Polly Swamp" or the Tufts Brick Manufacturing yards near Kidder Avenue are plagued by wet cellars and a variety of drainage problems.

As will be noted throughout this book, brickyards had a dramatic effect on the landscape of the town and later, the city. In 1871 the Report of the Committee on Highways noted the impact of clay pits on the appearance of the town, and compared the value of brickyard land versus land used for building purposes:

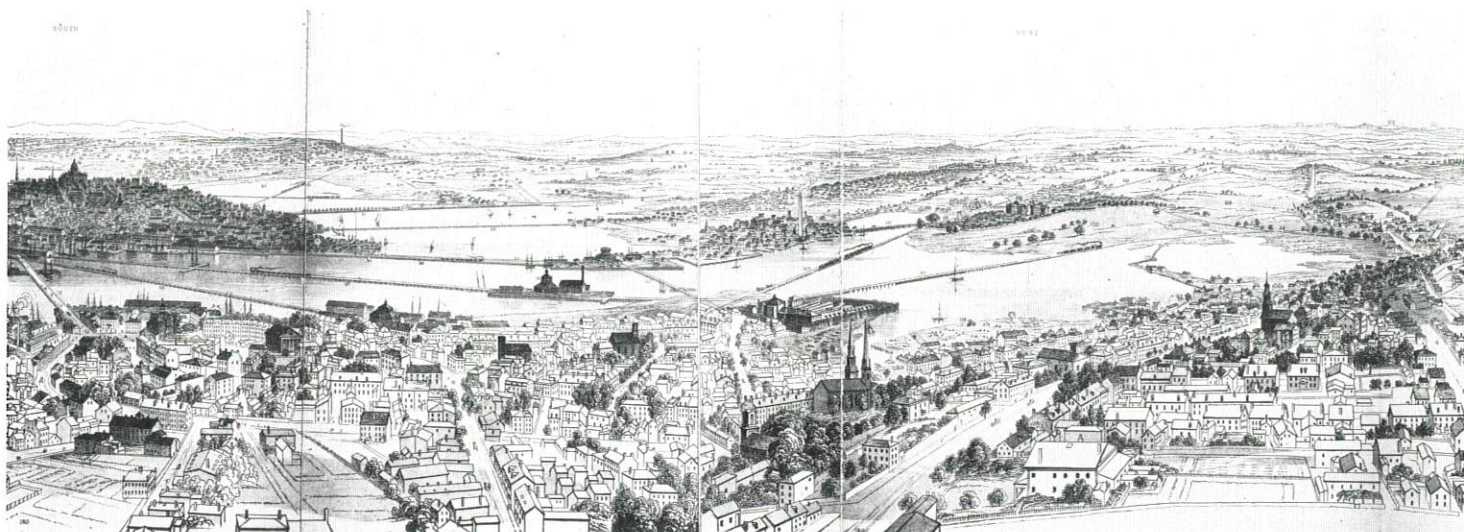
. . . the existence of large clay beds in the soil of Somerville has induced brickmakers to dig up some of the finest lands in the town, and after using the clay in the manufacture of brick, which are drawn to market over our streets to their great injury, these lands are left in a shapeless and uninviting condition, paying but small tax compared with what they would have paid had they remained in their natural condition. An acre of land with a bed of clay averaging 8' deep over its entire surface is valued at \$6,000 for making brick. By laying Highland Avenue through clayland suitable for building first class residences, these lands are worth \$8,000-\$10,000 per acre...



City Ledge, Holland Avenue, ca. 1898.



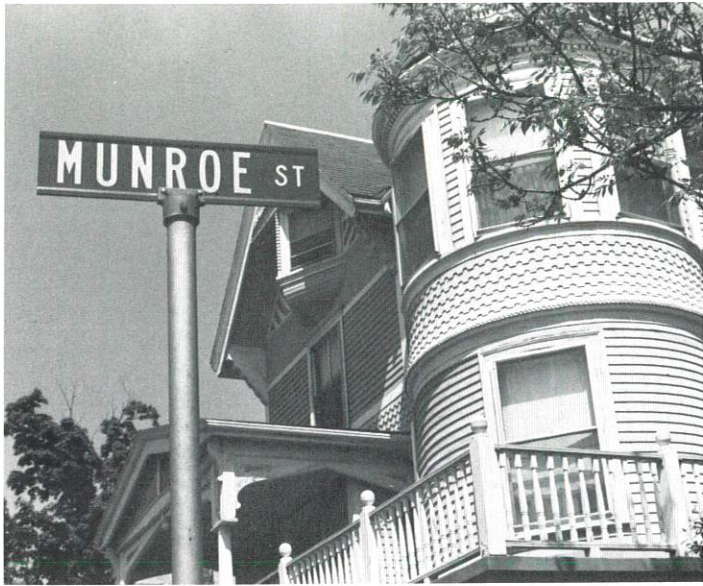
City Stone Crusher, ca. 1898.



**Panorama from Bunker Hill and Charlestown, ca. 1850.** Engraved view by James Smillie, Boston. Cobble Hill, Spring Hill, Winter Hill, Prospect Hill, and the Miller's River are shown in this early engraving. The Lowell, Fitchburg, and Maine Railroads are also visible. Somerville appears at the upper-central portion of the engraving.

**Aerial View, 1925.** Brickyards and the Mystic River marshes were still a major part of the landscape when this aerial view was made.





**Munroe Street, Prospect Hill.** Named for Edwin Munroe, a grain merchant and early resident of Prospect Hill.

## Place Names

Hills and natural features dominated the nomenclature of places in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Winter Hill appears on eighteenth century maps and land records, and it was one of few specific locations mentioned in nineteenth century Charlestown directories. Residents of peninsular Charlestown assigned few place names to the mainland and deeds and directories usually refer to the area as only "without the Peninsula", "Beyond the Neck" or "Outside the Neck". A number of popular nineteenth century place names such as "Strawberry Hill" (Ward II) and "Wildcat Hill" (West Somerville) are no longer used, but many Somerville land features and locales are described by names which originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Street names also commemorate early settlers (Adams, Mallet, Winthrop, Russell, or Derby) trees (Willow, Cedar, Elm) and particularly the nineteenth century businessmen, town officials and land speculators who often wore all three hats. Brastow, Simpson, Tower, Holland, Stickney, Gilman, Dimick and Vinal are named for these individuals, although some of those with the greatest impact on the city's development notably mayor and realtor Z.E. Cliff and businessman Ira Hill are missing. Lost natural features and old routes are still evident in street names: Granite Street was the road leading to the slate quarry of Osgood B. Dane, and Canal Road at Ten Hills abutted a portion of the Middlesex Canal.

**Lost Street Names in Somerville.** Street names were frequently changed as the city expanded within its borders. Often, two streets at opposite ends of the city shared the same name, and this is still the case in some instances (Summit Street, Summit Avenue). Old directories and maps reveal that many street names have been changed or abandoned as land use changed. Glass House Court, for example, housed many workers at the Union Glass Company but the site has been completely razed. Asylum Avenue, once the tree-lined lane to the McLean's Asylum, is indistinguishable since an industrial park was developed on the site. Lost names include:

- Asylum Avenue, from Washington to Cobble Hill and McLean's Asylum Distillhouse, from Miller's River to the Cambridge Line
- Fruit Street, from Broadway to Medford (now Dartmouth)
- Glass House Court, near Webster Avenue
- Jenny Lind Avenue, from Medford to Vernon (now Glenwood Rd.)
- New Street, from Beacon to Park Street
- New Walnut, from Broadway opposite Walnut Street
- Records Place, from 304 Broadway
- Shawmut, from Washington to Medford Street
- Tiger Court, from 101 Beacon, between Calvin and Washington
- Tube Works Court, from 422 Somerville Avenue





**Map of Place Names and Natural Features.** This composite map shows the succession of place names for a variety of locations in Somerville. Natural features shown on the map were present at settlement, but may have subsequently been removed.

### Annexation and Boundary Changes

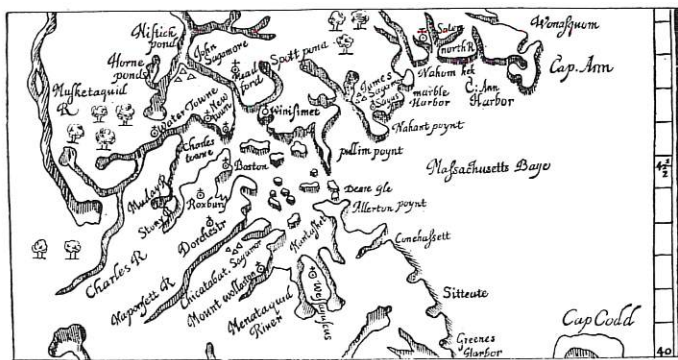
Most of Somerville lies between two and three miles of Boston City Hall. Annexation to Boston was debated in the 1860s and 1870s. Supporters of annexation argued that the interests of Somerville were more closely allied to Suffolk County than Middlesex, and that the majority of Somerville residents were employed in Boston. As Somerville's population grew and its municipal expenditures increased from \$593,349 in 1873 to \$1,571,854 in 1876, the prospect of annexation became increasingly attractive to some city officials. In 1879, opponents of annexation argued that Somerville was a "snug little city" whose residents were "abundantly able to manage it". Although Somerville would remain a separate city, the debate was re-kindled several times. There was some precedent for annexation. At the Cambridge line, several small tracts were set off to Cambridge from Charlestown in 1802, 1818, and 1820. One tract was set off from Somerville to Cambridge in 1856. Boundary disputes with Cambridge and Medford resulted in the irregular boundary line evident on contemporary maps.

**Boundary Marker 19, Boston Avenue.**





## Charlestown Beyond the Neck: 1630–1800



**Map of Charlestown, William Wood, 1634.** Somerville is part of a tract granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company by the Plymouth Council in 1628. The first white settlers found only a small number of Indians at Mishawum, the Indian name for Charlestown; the banks of the Mystic River and mouth of the Charles were their fishing and gathering places. The Indians were Pawtuckets, ruled by Nanepashemit, or New Moon, and later by the Squaw Sachem. The Squaw formally deeded Charlestown, Cambridge, and Watertown in 1639.

... on the North Side of the Charles River is Charlestown, which is another neck of land, on whose North side runs the Misticke River. This towne for all things may be well parale'd with her neighbor, Boston, being in the same fashion with her bare necke and constrained to borrow conveniences from the Maine, and to provide for themselves farmes in the cuntry for there better subsistence . . .

*William Wood, New England Prospect, 1634*

Settler William Wood's description of the peninsular town of Charlestown and its outlying territory on the mainland (or Maine) indicates the dependence of the early settlement on the agricultural hinterland, including the lands now in Somerville. Somerville was originally among the mainland holdings of Charlestown, settled in 1629. Malden, Woburn, Stoneham, Burlington, and parts of Medford, Cambridge, West Cambridge (Arlington) and Reading were included in the original tract. Woburn was created in 1642, and in 1842, Somerville was the last to be set off as an independent town. The early Charlestown settlement of 1600 persons was concentrated on the 1¼ mile long, oval peninsula whose chief land forms were Breed, Bunker, and Town Hills. The first inhabitants of Charlestown were occupied with division and fencing of the mainland. In the first decades of settlement, the land division system followed the open field system of medieval England, with house lots granted in town (the Charlestown peninsula) and grazing and plowing land granted on the mainland and elsewhere on the peninsula. Large tracts on the mainland were held in common for grazing. In 1629, the town voted that each inhabitant "should have two acres for planting ground and to fence in common;" in 1630, it was voted that "each dwelling within the neck should have two acres of land for a house plots, and two acres for every male that is able to plant." Over the next decades, land on the mainland was divided into parcels of ten to two hundred acres. In 1631, however, Governor John Winthrop was granted 600 acres of land in present-day Medford and Somerville. Winthrop's Ten Hills farm, as he called it, was the largest tract granted by Charlestown to an individual.

In 1637 the land between the Winter Hill Road (Broadway) and Charlestown Lane (Somerville Avenue) was divided into rights of pasturage, the land being reserved as common land for "milk cows, working cattle, goats, and calves." Until grants of land were made to individuals in 1681, the mainland area beyond the narrow neck of Charlestown, including this cow commons, was largely uninhabited. John Wolrich, an Indian trader and Representative to the General Court in 1634, who located near Washington and Dane Streets in the vicinity of "Strawberry Hill", and Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop at Ten Hills were among the few original set-

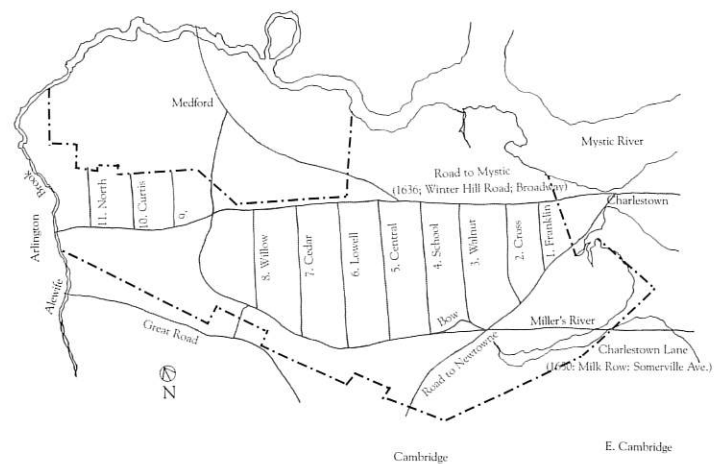
tlers. Two roads, The Road to Newtowne (Washington Street) and the Winter Hill Road (Broadway) were laid out in the 1630s by surveyor Thomas Greaves and radiated from the peninsular Charlestown settlement near City Square through Somerville, skirting the marshes. The Road to Newtowne ran to Harvard Square; the Winter Hill Road originally ran to Medford, later connecting to Menotomy, or Arlington. Seventeenth century Charlestown Lane (Milk Row, and later Somerville Avenue) extended from Washington Street to Medford via the route of present-day Bow Street, Elm Street and College Avenue. Main Street, from Winter Hill, went to Medford over Craddock's Bridge, the first bridge over the Mystic between Medford and the Charlestown mainland. Two ferries connected Charlestown with Boston. The first was established near the Charles River Bridge in 1631, another in 1640 near the Malden Bridge.

An estimated ten to fifteen houses were constructed within the borders of present-day Somerville in the first seventy years of settlement, most of them situated along or near Charlestown Neck on Broadway, Washington Street, or Somerville Avenue. Although there is no record of the appearance of these early dwellings, it is likely that they followed medieval English precedent, and were constructed of hand-hewn timber frames and sided with weatherboards or "clapboards." A two-story, two-room, central-chimney house plan was the standard of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

One writer described the homesteads of the early inhabitants of Charlestown as "humble places indeed; with rough walls, thatched roofs, and catted chimneys . . ." Thatched roofs were soon replaced with wood and shingle roofs, due to the danger of fire.

Tailors, coopers, ropemakers, glaziers, tilers, collar makers, anchor smiths, charcoal burners, joiners, wheelwrights and blacksmiths were among the first settlers of the Charlestown peninsula farming and related agricultural pursuits occupied the majority of inhabitants beyond the Neck.

The cow commons became the "Stinted Pasture" in 1681 when it was apportioned among Charlestown residents and the pattern of collectively-held fields was changed to individual family homesteads. In 1681 and again in 1685 the lands between Washington Street, Somerville Avenue, Broadway and Alewife Brook were divided into one and one quarter mile wide lots, separated by numbered rangeways corresponding to the streets or avenues of present-day Franklin, Cross, Walnut, School, Central, Lowell, Cedar, Willow, Curtis and North. Many of the rangeways were only rutted paths closed by private fences and were not improved as public roads or streets until the 1850s and 1860s. Some, at the west, were unimproved until after 1890. Today, these streets are highly visible indications of the early agricultural land division pattern. Winthrop's farm at Ten Hills, the most extensive tract held by an individ-



**Map of Early Roads.** The north-south rangeways were created in 1681 and 1685, and connected with the few early roads of the Charlestown mainland.



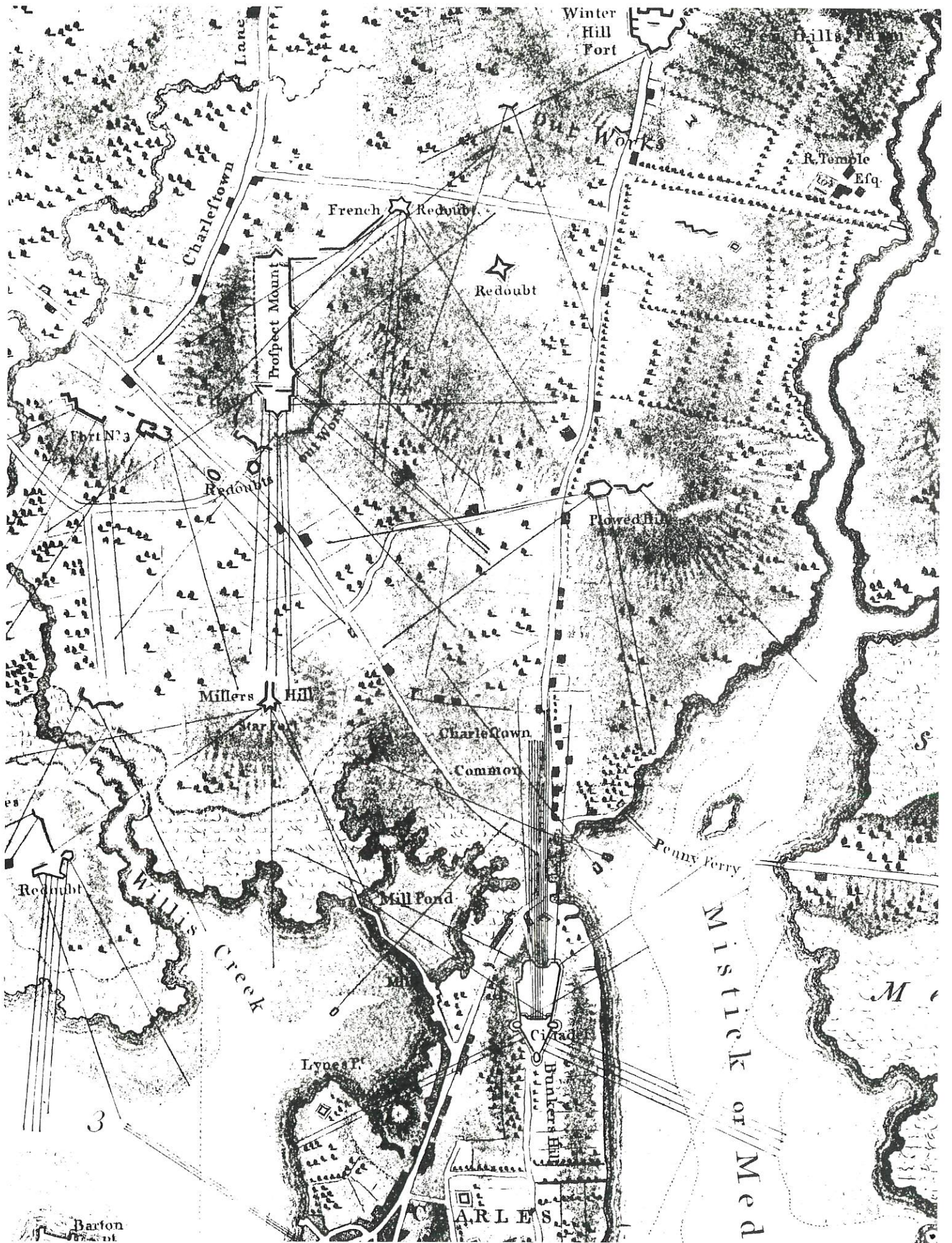
**The Powderhouse, ca. 1703.** Photograph ca. 1895. This granite and slate-walled gristmill on Quarry Hill was built by Jean Mallet between 1703 and 1725. Thirty feet high and nineteen feet in diameter with a conical roof, it was a landmark for the few eighteenth and early nineteenth century travelers in the western section of Somerville, then Charlestown. The structure served as a gristmill until 1747, when it was sold by Mallet's son to the Province of Massachusetts. Shortly thereafter it was remodeled into a magazine for holding gunpowder. On September 1, 1774, 250 half-barrels of powder were seized by General Gage in one of the first hostile actions of the Revolution. This photograph was made over a century later, after Nathan Tufts donated the site to the City of Somerville for a park. City Engineer Horace Eaton's design conserved the natural ledge, and maintained the topographical character of the area surrounding the unique structure.

ual, lay outside the rangeways, as did most of Ward II.

Dairy farms within the Stinted Pasture supplied milk and cheese to Charlestown and the north end of Boston. Milk products were laboriously brought on horseback and in carts through Charlestown and across the ferry to Boston. Milk Row, as Charlestown Lane became known, abutted several of the largest farms, and was the main route through Somerville for the transport of farm products from West Cambridge (now Arlington) and the territory beyond. Milk Row is now Somerville Avenue.

Although settlers of the Charlestown mainland established sawmills, gristmills, lime kilns, and fish weirs, the exact location of these early industries is not well-documented. But still standing, is a slate-walled gristmill built between 1703 and 1715 on the knob of the dike of the Medford diabase. This site, called Quarry Hill by early settlers, is situated at the intersection of two early routes, the Winter Hill Road and Charlestown Lane. The gray stone, locally referred to as slate, was quarried at this site by seventeenth and eighteenth century settlers for foundations and gravestones and several generations brought their corn and grain to the mill for grinding.

Somerville's river location and prominent hills gave it strategic importance during the defense against the British. Hostile action north of Boston began in 1774 with the seizure of powder from the gristmill at Quarry Hill. British soldiers skirmished in Somerville in April of 1775, and several were killed in the retreat from Concord along Elm Street and Somerville Avenue. Ten Hills, Ploughed Hill (Mt. Benedict), Prospect Hill, Cobble Hill, and Winter Hill were fortified during the Revolution, and remnants of some of the wooden breastworks existed well into the twentieth century.





Oliver Tufts House, 78 Sycamore Street, 1714.

**Samuel Ireland House, 117 Washington, 1792.** The five bay facade of this small eighteenth century house reflects the original arrangement of windows and doors. Narrow strips of original moldings are still evident at the eaves and window enframements. Built by Samuel Ireland, a farmer, and son of early settler Jonathan Ireland.



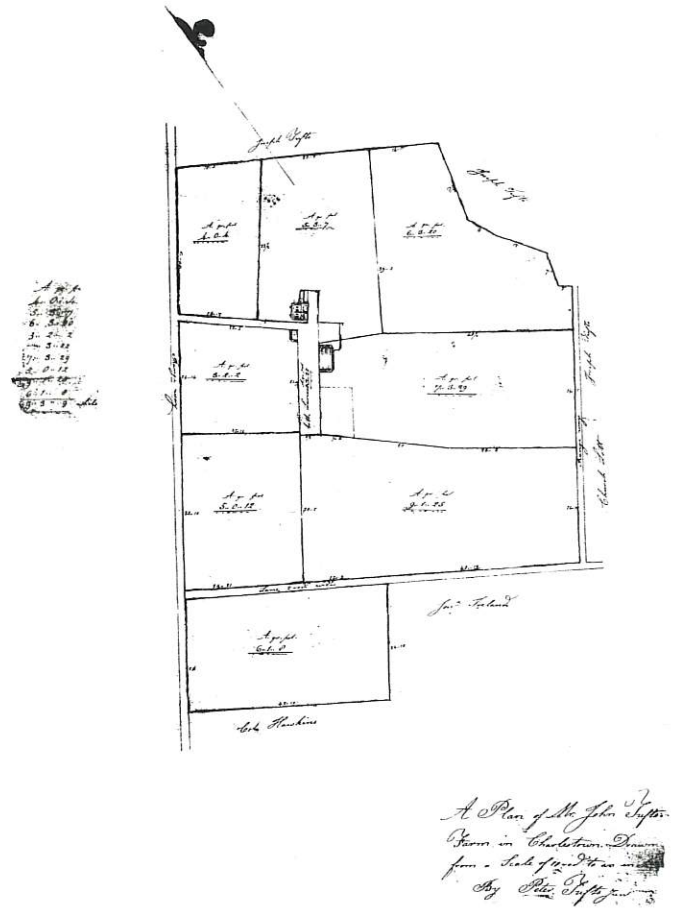
## Colonial and Georgian Styles

Eighteenth century dwellings, in the form of a few farmhouses near the rangeways and along the Winter Hill Road, the Road to Newtowne and Milk Row, were simple structures of heavy-timbered construction. Photographs of now-razed houses indicate that the central entry, five-bay facade with a gable or hipped roof was characteristic. Slate for foundations and chimneys came from the local ledges; some lime for mortar and lumber could also be had nearby. On a modest scale in keeping with the hinterland location, the style characteristics of Georgian architecture appeared on only a few houses built along the main roads of mainland Charlestown. The double-pitched hip or gambrel roof appeared by 1750. Other Georgian style features included cornices and pedimented entrances.

The gambrel-roofed Oliver Tufts House, built in 1714 on a large agricultural tract on Winter Hill, has been altered, but photographs indicate the earlier appearance of Somerville's oldest extant house. Two late-eighteenth century gable roofed houses also survive: the Samuel Ireland House (1792) at 117 Washington Street, and a small dwelling (ca. 1790) at the rear of 72 Dane Street near Washington Street.

Although the eighteenth century dwellings of the Charlestown mainland were built primarily by farmers, by 1770 the area "beyond the Neck" was chosen as the site for the houses of several prominent individuals from Boston and a small number of Charlestown merchants. These men made the journey to Boston or Charlestown by private coach, or by walking the poor roads of the day.

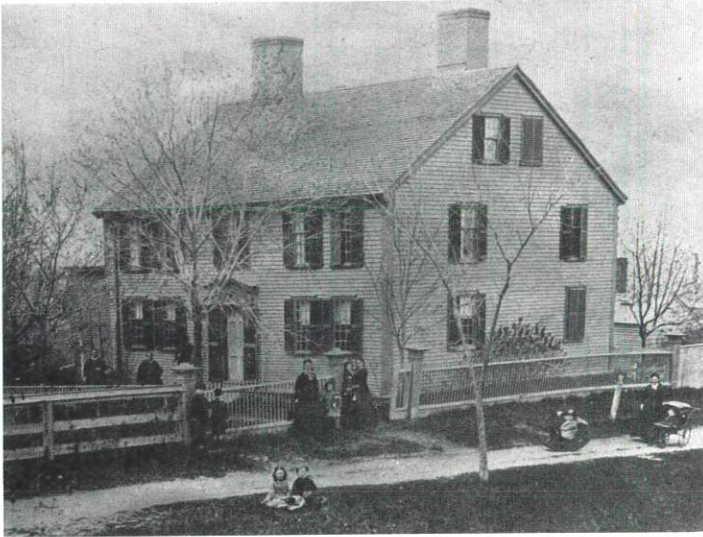
In the 1770s, Sir Robert Temple purchased the Ten Hills farm of Governor John Winthrop and built a handsome mansion with a pedimented Georgian entry near present-day Temple Street. The hip-roofed Temple House (destroyed in 1877) was among the first of several eighteenth century buildings beyond the Neck which reflected the architectural influence of nearby Boston.



Tufts Land Plan, ca. 1813.



Stearnes House, 47 Broadway, ca. 1750, razed. Situated at the foot of Mt. Benedict opposite George Street (where Broadway Brake is today), the Stearnes House was one of the fine eighteenth century farmhouses of Broadway or Winter Hill Road. One of the family, Joshua Stearnes, ran a distillery at Neck Village in Charlestown in the 1830's.



**Adams-Magoun House, 438 Broadway, 1783.** Photograph 1890. The only remaining eighteenth century house on the Old Winter Hill Road (Broadway), the Adams-Magoun house has a Federal period fanlight in the central entry.

## The Federal Style

The Neo-classical details of the Adams-Magoun House (1783) situated at the top of Winter Hill show the influence of the Federal Style which was popular into the 1820s. This five bay, gable-roofed house has a leaded three-part fanlight, reportedly one of the earliest in the Boston area. The finest Federal house built within the limits of present-day Somerville was the 1793 Joseph Barrell House, at Cobble Hill, designed by Boston's leading architect, Charles Bulfinch. The three-story brick mansion, built for a wealthy merchant, had the rounded projecting central bay characteristic of high-styled Federal houses of the period. When the Barrell House and landscaped grounds were acquired by the Massachusetts General Hospital for the McLean's Asylum in 1816, Bulfinch was again commissioned to design the wings of the new hospital. At least one other stylish Federal house was built within Somerville's present borders, that of Edward Cutter on Broadway in East Somerville. This five-bay, three-story brick house had the flat balustraded roof and the carefully modulated fenestration associated with the Federal Style work of Charles Bulfinch, although there is no record of the architect or builder.





**Joseph Barrell House, 1793.** Photo ca. 1885. The Barrell House had an elliptical salon on axis with the vestibule and stair hall, which served as the focus for a secondary suite running at right angles along the garden front. Bulfinch's design showed the influence of English Neoclassicists in the elevations and interior details such as a 32-foot flying staircase, probably modeled on a 1776 staircase at Doddington Hall, Cheshire. When the Barrell house was razed in 1896, Frederick Shaw purchased the staircase and two soapstone mantels for his country house at Wayland. In 1942, when the Shaw house was demolished, the staircase and mantels were presented to the Somerville Historical Society.

**Edward Cutter House, Broadway at Cross Street East, ca. 1815.** This three story, Federal Style brick house belonged to a farmer and businessman. Razed.