

From Powder House Pickles to Ball Square Brick Yards: Rapid Suburban Growth in West Somerville at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

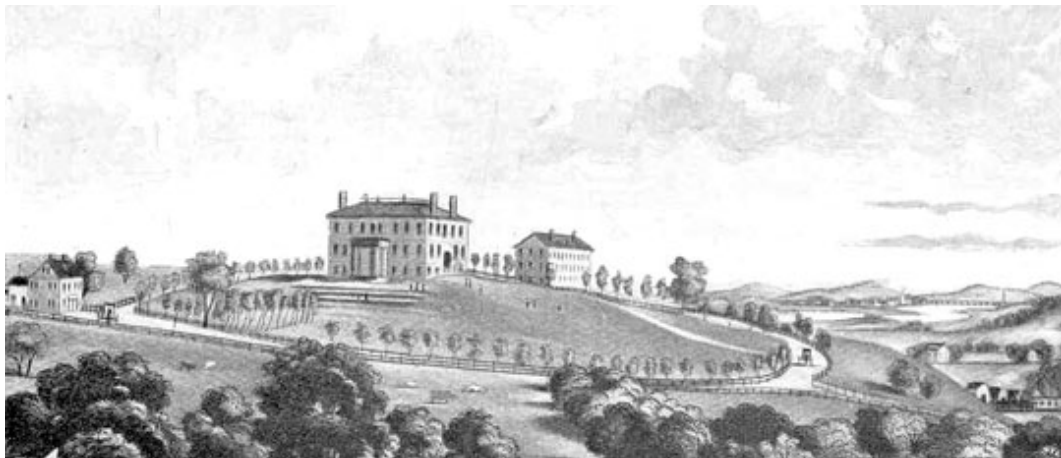
By Edward W. Gordon

Until as late as the 1880s, the Nathan Tufts family owned most of the land located between College Avenue and Cedar Street. Tufts had been living in the area well before the American Revolution. Fast forwarding to the 1870s, the Tufts family domain between Powder House and Ball Squares embraced a substantial farm house that was located on the site of the two family houses at 771 and 773 Broadway as well as extensive farmlands, a pickle factory and, above all, brick yards. Indeed, between the 1830s and the 1870s, the sheds, kilns and clay beds of the Tufts Brick Manufactory Company dominated the landscape of the large area bounded by Willow, Morrison, Cedar and Broadway. The introduction of the Boston & Lowell Railroad in 1836, at the eastern edge of the tour area, had everything to do with the initial prosperity of the Tuft's brick manufacturing enterprise, while the national financial crisis of 1873 hastened its demise.



Workers using a brick-making machine at the Brickyards on lower College Avenue. Courtesy of the Medford Historical Society.

Over time, the Tufts family gave back to their community providing land in West Somerville for a college campus and park. In fact, over 100 acres of land was donated to the first Universalist College in the world: Tufts College, later Tufts University. Founded in 1852, Tufts College was built atop Walnut Tree Hill which straddles the Somerville/



Tufts University circa 1855

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Medford line just to the west of College Avenue (originally part of a Colonial era thoroughfare called Elm Street). Tufts opened its doors in 1855 with five professors, thirty students along with the noted theologian Hosea Ballou Jr. as its first President.



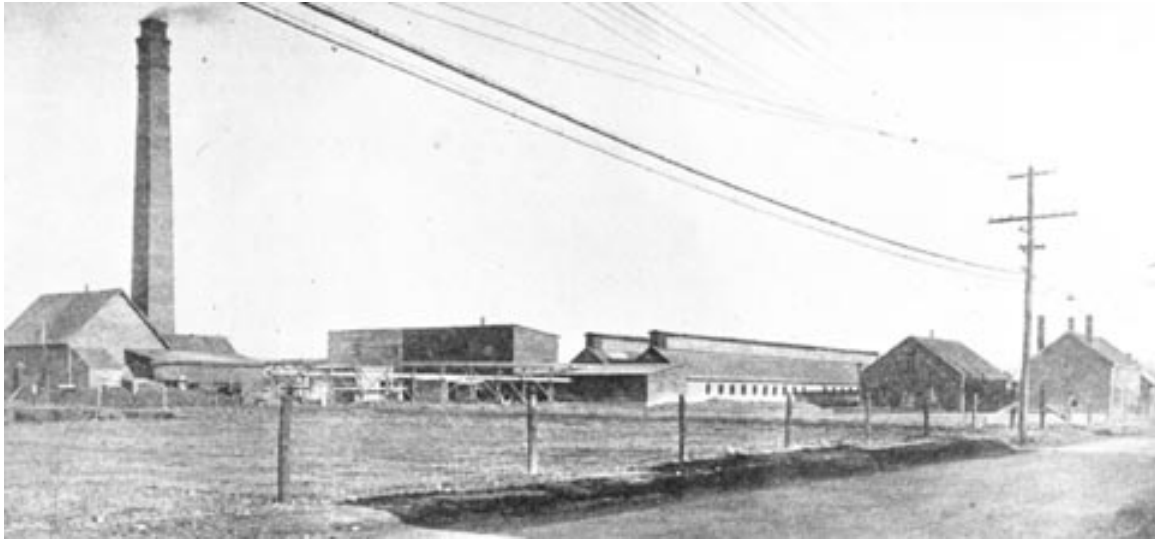
Tufts University circa 1910

During the early 1890s, another West Somerville hill—Quarry Hill-- figured prominently in a Tufts family gift of land that resulted in a mid-sized park called **Nathan Tufts Park**. This park contains one of Somerville's most storied and iconic landmarks: **the Old Powder House**. Built in 1704 as a windmill and later, in its most famous incarnation, it served as a gun powder storage facility whose explosive material was confiscated by British Red Coats in Sept 1, 1774 before it could fall into the hands of local colonists. The seizure is considered a pivotal event leading to the American Revolution.



The Powder House at Nathan
Tufts Park, 1704, picture
from early 1900s

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New England Brickyards, formerly Bay State Brickyards in Medford - similar to those owned by the Tufts family in Somerville/Medford. The smokestacks of the kilns were a prominent site over Somerville during the 1800s.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the land of the Tufts heirs was carved up into three major subdivisions that included the large area bounded by Broadway, College Avenue, Dearborn Road and Pearson Road as well as the Powder House Farms tract that includes Powder House Terrace, Mallet Street, Bay State Avenue, Lowden Avenue and part of Kidder Avenue. The third and largest suburban subdivision was the 500-lot tract bounded by Willow Street, Broadway, Cedar Street and Morrison Avenue. This area's streets were set out over the former Tufts Brick Yards in 1901 by developer and contractor Wilbur Rice. Two earlier street patterns for the area were surveyed in 1873 and 1891 but ultimately it was Rice's plan that became reality. Rice is credited with the idea of setting Highland Road out with a 10'-wide "extra" green belt that was located between the sidewalk and the curb in front of Rice-built houses.

The tour is designed, in part, to showcase some of the best examples of two-family houses ever built in the Boston area. Few communities can match Somerville for the sheer numbers of this multi-family house type whose distinctive volumes, ornate exterior and interior elements and the sheer roominess of their interiors afford highly desirable living quarters. Indeed, two family residences figured prominently in the great Somerville building boom of 1890-to-1910 when the number of buildings doubled and the population increased significantly from around 20,000 in 1890 to well over 60,000 by 1910.

The introduction of the electric trolley to Somerville around 1890 and more widespread automobile ownership during the first quarter of the twentieth century opened West Somerville to comprehensive development over the former farm lands of Cooks, Russells, Teels as well as Tufts.

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The Tour:

The Field House at Powder House Park

Built in 1935-1936 as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, this toy castle-like building was constructed using stones from the demolished Highland Railroad Station on Lexington Avenue.

Nathan Tufts (Powder House) Park A gift to the City of Somerville by the Nathan Tufts' heirs in 1892, this oasis of greenery is perched atop blue or brownish bedrock called Cambridge Mudstone or Somerville Slate—stone that was quarried here as early as 1700 within the picturesquely named Two-Penny Brook Quarry—hence the name Quarry Hill. Nathan Tufts Jr. (1818-1887), for whom the park is named founded Nathan Tufts & Sons, "Dealers in Hay, Grain, Meal and Straw" in 1841. The park, itself, is credited to Somerville City Engineer, Horace Eaton, who planned and built walkways and a carriageway, using crushed stone obtained from the property.



Nathan Tufts Park with the Field House just visible to the right rear of the photograph.

From Powder House Square we'll pause to consider **Tufts University's campus** and then continue for a short distance along Warner Street to consider:

9 Warner Street--

Representing an interesting amalgam of late Victorian and early 20th century Craftsman design influences, this house was built as a rare single family within its neighborhood and was home to a German salesman and his family who were in residence here by 1906.



From 9 Warner, we'll look northward at the handsome march of late 1890s-to-1910 gambrel and gable roofed Colonial Revival two family houses that border **Bromfield Road.**

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Retracing our steps we'll walk back to Broadway and carefully re-cross busy Broadway in order to further explore Nathan Tufts Park.

Bronze Pickle Relish Jars The pickle relish jars in the park are replicas of an original jar found buried in an Arlington, MA backyard. By 1875, a pickle and condiment manufacturer named George Emerson began making pickles. He housed his business in a large shed that he moved to the property from another location in Somerville. Emerson named his product "Old Powder House Brand" pickles.



A recently renovated ancient windmill in France similar to that built by Jean Mallet in 1704. Moulin des Terres Blanches

Built in 1704 as a stone windmill that is roughly 15 feet in diameter and 30 feet high, The Old Powder House was originally owned by the French Protestant ship builder Jean Mallet. In 1747, the Mallet family sold it to the Province of Massachusetts as a gunpowder storage facility. While the British General Thomas Gage's raid on the Powder House in 1774 is well known as one of the incidents that lead to the outbreak of the American Revolution, this structure's role as a critical Continental Army munitions depot deserves to be highlighted in histories focusing on the period of 1775-1776. Looking ahead to 1972, the Old Powder House replaced General Washington at Prospect Heights as the focal point of the City of Somerville's seal.

Continuing our stroll behind the Powder House, the southern edge of the park is defined by Powder House Terrace, a particularly memorable thoroughfare that is bordered by

Large Shingle Style/ Colonial Revival residences with rocky, rustic retaining walls.

29 Powder House Terrace is a fine example of the Shingle Style, which became popular around 1880 in upscale coastal New England resorts. Built ca.1900 by and for prominent Somerville carpenter/ contractor Z.E. Cliff, this house underscores the fact that the presence of Powder House Park encouraged houses of unusually fine design and craftsmanship.

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31-33 Kidder Avenue

31-33 Kidder Avenue was built in 1894 by and for the local contracting firm of Robbins and Stevens. Representing a well-preserved example of the Queen Anne style, this impressive, wood shingle-clad residence retains its original two-tier porch that is completely covered with wooden shingles.

44 Kidder Avenue was built in 1895-1896 for Laura and Stephen Lewis. Mr. Lewis was a carpenter and partner in Hudson & Lewis, an East Somerville company that dealt in real estate, insurance, hardware and painters' supplies. Designed in the queen Anne style, this house is located within Nathan and Francis tuft's subdivision that was called Powder house Farms.



44 Kidder Avenue

Somerville's population grew by half in the 1890s as extensive areas were platted and developed with new residences. In West Somerville, former brickyards, farms and estates were built up into a suburb of two-family homes with ready commuting access to Boston via the Arlington and Lexington Branch Railroad. The influx of new families led to the construction of new schools to serve the greatly expanded school age population.



Built in 1900 at 201 Willow Avenue (corner of Kidder Avenue), The Brown School is the oldest school currently in use in Somerville. Representing a handsome blend of Federal Revival and Classical Revival styles this red brick school was named for Benjamin Graves Brown (1937-1903) who was associated with Tufts University for over 40 years,

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serving a good part of that time as the Walker Professor of Mathematics.

The Queen Anne house at 65 Josephine Street, corner of Kidder Avenue, was built by and for carpenter T. Sylvester Woods was a carpenter, real estate agent and inventor of "Woods Improved Gutters for Buildings" He was also known for "jobbing promptly" and "adjusting fire losses."

46 and 48 Rogers Avenue, corner of Kidder Avenue, were built in 1901-1902 as fine, nearly identical examples of a compact Shingle Style house. The first owner of number 46 was Samuel W. Staples who moved from School Street to this house. 48 Rogers Avenue's first owner was Lawrence G. Ripley, piano tuner.



These Colonial Revival houses were built on Highland Road, Highland Park, in the Somerville

Set out in 1901-1902, Highland Road's streetscapes rank among the most memorable in Somerville.

Characterized by a great expanse of closely spaced two-family houses that exhibit Colonial Revival characteristics; these houses overlook a street that measures 80 feet in width. The 10' wide green space located between the sidewalk and the curb is as much "park land" as could be spared in this densely built-up neighborhood. Surveyor Charles Eliot in his plan for this area dating to 1891 envisioned a little bit more in the way of green space in the form of the small rectangular Ayer Park that was bisected by Kidder Avenue at the center of the neighborhood. The earliest houses in the neighborhood sold for \$4200 a piece and early residents worked as manufacturers, real estate agents as well as many traveling salesmen. 30 Highland Avenue was among the first houses built in the area in 1901-1902 for B. W. Gleason. Still extant bordering Highland Road are a few of the 600 original shade trees.



Located at the intersection of Broadway and Boston Avenue, Ball Square was named for John N. Ball, a manufacturer of pasted shoes. Broadway has been a key road through northern Somerville since the mid 1600s. Boston Avenue is the gateway to Medford whose boundary with Somerville is located but a single building lot from Broadway.

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North Somerville Train Station

As early as 1836, the Boston and Lowell Railroad crossed Broadway at the eastern end of the square, making this area a natural crossroads.. In the not too distant future Ball Square will once again have direct access to a train when the Green Line extension from Lechmere Station in East Cambridge is thrust through Somerville to the Tufts campus. Already called the Breakfast Capital of Greater Boston. Ball Square's plethora of ethnic and all-American restaurants will become accessible to a wider spectrum of T-riding diners.

In 1923, architect Parker B. Stanley designed the Ball Square Theatre at 707 Broadway. All that remains of the theatre is the associated multi-store commercial block whose Federal Revival motifs were identical to those of the theatre. The Theatre was designed to show silent movies and was owned for the first sixteen years of its existence by the theatre-owning Locatelli family of Somerville. The theatre burned in 1939 and was subsequently purchased, rehabilitated and reopened by the M & P Theatre chain in 1946. Ten years later the theatre closed its doors for good as motion pictures were surpassed by television. The theatre was completely destroyed by fire in 1986.



Locatelli's Theatre in Davis Square circa 1941

The tour will conclude with a look at some of the finest two-family designs in Somerville—or anywhere. 5 Pearson Road design deftly blends Queen Anne end gable form with Colonial Revival porch elements. Built ca. 1905, 771 and 773 Broadway rank among the most substantial two-family residences ever built in Somerville and possess a variety of window sizes and shapes as well as leaded glass.



773
Broadway

The tour concludes at the Powder House Park Field House