

Assembly Square Walking Tour: A Historical Perspective

Sponsored by Assembly Connect

in concert with the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission

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October 2021

Welcome! The Assembly Square area is continuously evolving, and this walking tour is designed to outline salient history that has shaped the land area and informs its current appearance. Due to its one-hour brevity, designed for a lunchtime series, the tour will only touch upon a few historical features and extend a short distance from the starting point. We encourage further exploration later, with the guidance of other notable documents, including a self-guided tour brochure developed in 1999 by the Mystic View Task Force [OSPCD & Historic Events and Education](#), plus the recently completed Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan (October 2021) by the Planning and Zoning Division of the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) <https://voice.somervillema.gov/>.

Assembly Row is a 45-acre inner core of the larger Assembly Square area that today is characterized by a diverse mix of retail, commercial and residential buildings. Additional amenities include a private marina for yachts, a revitalized waterfront park, a swath of bike paths, and landscaped open and green space throughout the area. The developers of Assembly Row broke ground in April 2012 and opened it officially in 2014. The layout is reflective of the "smart growth" or "Compact City" movement that Somerville has been promoting for over a decade. This planning approach is designed to concentrate new growth in compact, walkable urban centers, that are well-served by public or non-motorized vehicles, to avoid sprawl and inefficient use of limited land.

The name **Assembly Square** refers to the larger 143-acre area bound by the Ten Hills neighborhood and Route 28 to the north, Mystic River to the east, Boston's Charlestown neighborhood to the south, and Interstate 93 to the west. During the latter part of the 20th century several efforts were undertaken by private development companies to successfully transform the then primarily industrial area into a suburban style shopping hub. A third entity more recently launched another vision, more in keeping with the City's goals, to create a new and burgeoning neighborhood strongly linked to the rest of Somerville.



<https://www.bing.com/images>

This local history tour will look at the evolving Assembly Square neighborhood through two lenses: the redevelopment of certain properties at the periphery of Assembly Square and the more recent transformation of the area known as Assembly Row. While not covered in this brief overview, it is important to note that thousands of years before the appearance of English settlers, Native Americans resided in the area, with the Massachusetts tribe dating as far back as 2,400 B.C.

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From 330 Canal Street walk south to Grand Union Boulevard to view the prior and greatly altered Ford Assembly plant. Before discussing the story of this plant, it is best to understand the multi-layered history of the area to its south, between Middlesex Avenue and Broadway.



Overview graphic map excerpted from [Assembly Square Master Plan \(goodyclancy.com\)](https://www.goodyclancy.com/assembly-square-master-plan/)

Broadway was set out as early as the mid-1630s. Its path originally extended from what is now Sullivan Square in Charlestown, up to the eastern slope of Winter Hill, and then turned right onto Main Street. Paul Revere followed this segment of Broadway at the beginning of his famous “Midnight Ride” from Charlestown to Lexington on April 18, 1775, to warn the colonists that the British soldiers were marching out and to nip in the bud a possible rebellion.

The **Middlesex Canal**, an important trade artery linking the Merrimack River with Boston Harbor, was built between 1794 and 1803. Current day East Somerville contained a portion of the 22-mile-long canal that ran parallel to Broadway, on the way to its southern terminus in Sullivan Square, Charlestown. The primary purpose was to ship farm products and building materials like wood and granite. For example, University Hall on Harvard Yard was built with Chelmsford granite that reached its destination via the Canal. The Canal also provided a way to shuttle passengers—particularly picnickers from Boston—to green spaces bordering the Mystic Lakes and Horn’s Pond in Winchester.

The demise of the Middlesex Canal began during the mid-1830s when the first railroads in the area could haul goods and people much faster and more efficiently and was less seasonal. The Canal ceased operations in 1853.

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During the period of 1820-1880 Somerville was known for its **brick industry** as the marsh land in the vicinity of Foss Park was characterized by clay deposits that were perfect for making these building materials. This allowed many of the Irish immigrants coming into the Boston area starting in the 1840s to find employment in these brickyards. The industry boomed, and brick manufacturing became the predominant trade in Somerville. Before mechanical presses were invented, Somerville produced 1.3 million bricks a year! The Jacques brickyard, located just to the south of the Ford Motors site, was, for example, among the community's most successful brick-making enterprises. Old photographs, however, of the enterprise show the downside of this industry -- a blighted landscape of pits, wooden storage structures, and kilns with brick chimneys. Therefore, by the late 19th century the land housing brickyards became more valuable for building residential subdivisions, ending an important chapter in Somerville's economic history.

During the 1870s, **Foss Park** was created to the south of Assembly Square. It was the product in part of a growing awareness that the community might run out of open space given its strong residential growth. The location of the park, however, on the border between the East Somerville and Winter Hill neighborhoods, was controversial because it was not within or even near the center of the City. Today, Foss Park is the second largest park in Somerville, occupying 8% of the designated recreational land.

The **Boston and Maine Railroad** was extended to the eastern edge of the community by 1842, but it was not until the 1920s that spur lines were provided to specific sites in the Assembly Square area. In addition, during the mid-1920s, the **Monsignor McGrath and O'Brien Highway** (aka the Northern Artery) was constructed just south of Assembly Square. Together, these major transportation enhancements had a profound impact on Somerville's overall economy at that time, and, particularly on the Assembly Square area. Both this "super-highway" (at that time), plus the convenient installation of a rail spur, prompted the Ford Motors Company and the A&P grocery chain to build facilities in the eastern part of the City. The highway became a part of Route 28 that encompassed a system of pre-existing and new roads extending from Eastham on Cape Cod to Methuen, MA on the New Hampshire border. Interestingly, the McGrath and O'Brien may be the only highway, certainly in this area, that was named after two priests—both were long associated and prominent figures within St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Union Square, Somerville.

Ford Motor Company's Assembly Plant was built in 1926 on a 52-acre site that had recently been reclaimed from the marshes on the south bank of the Mystic River. At its opening in 1925 the Ford plant encompassed 340,000 square feet of floor space, and a long rectangular length of 1,300 square feet. The one-story building rises 14 feet to the bottom of its roof trusses and an additional sixteen feet to the gable of the roof. Newspaper accounts at the time lauded the light, airy interior spaces that promoted a "mental attitude of contentment." No longer extant is the distinctive saw tooth roof whose skylights brought daylight into the plant. Older Somerville residents recall the long line of windows piercing the Middlesex Avenue wall which enabled curious passersby to watch the progress of cars moving along the assembly line.



Exterior of the Ford plant from the 1950s.

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Over the next 30 years, the Ford Assembly Plant remained one of the largest employment centers in the region. The plant was expanded in 1937 and was later known for its manufacture of the Edsel, named after Henry Ford's heir. The Edsel automobile, however, was roundly dismissed by the American public as "unattractive, overpriced and overhyped" and its demise, compounded by a change in Ford's manufacturing strategies, resulted in the Assembly plant closing in 1958. The Ford Motor Company sustained a loss of \$250 million dollars, and the Edsel became synonymous with commercial failure. It hurt Somerville both economically and physically, taking away hundreds of jobs and leaving a vast array of empty manufacturing buildings. Shortly after Ford's departure the grocery delivery operations of First National moved into the former assembly plant. They ceased operations in 1976, marking the end of the Assembly Square area as a major employment center for industrial uses, although some firms like Central Steel and Green and Yellow Cab, remained in operation for several more decades.

Two different real estate development firms purchased the vacant plant and other nearby properties in the late 1970's through the 1990's, to transform the area into a commercial center with an office building, multiplex movie theater, restaurants, and eventually an entertainment facility. The prior automotive plant was converted into Somerville's first massive interior mall, known as the **Assembly Square Mall**. The long building housed a variety of small retail and service establishments and was anchored by a K-Mart and Jordan Marsh store at either end. Arguably it was the City's largest adaptive reuse project.

While the development initially opened to great fanfare in 1980 and brought many new stores and shoppers to this previously industrial area, neither of the efforts by the East Bay Development Company, followed by the National Development Company, proved to be great financial successes over time. As a result, in 2004, **Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT)**, a Maryland-based company, acquired their holdings, along with other land parcels in Assembly Square. Their arrival was prompted by several new forces: 1) significant input into the City's planning process by a well-organized and talented group of individuals known as the Mystic View Task Force; 2) continuing marketplace realities that made urban sites less competitive for industrial development and required rezoning of the area; and 3) the election of a new Mayor, Joseph A. Curtatone, in 2004. FRIT's take-over led to transformative change to the area and the re-naming of a significant section of Assembly Square into "**Assembly Row.**"



Phase One Site Improvements created by Copley Wolff Design Group for FRIT.

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At the corner of Grand Union Boulevard and Great River Road pause to consider a building and highway development that cannot be seen from here but needs to be referenced due to their significant impact on the area's redevelopment.

The **Middlesex District Court** building at 175 Fellsway was built in 1967, reputedly to heighten the visibility and activity level in the struggling Assembly Square area. The red brick and stone trimmed courthouse was designed in the Colonial, or more specifically, Georgian Revival style at a time when many public buildings embraced modernist design—i.e. Boston's City Hall in the mid-1960s in the New Brutalist style.



The **Interstate highway, known as I-93** was constructed to the south of Assembly Square, linking southern New Hampshire with Boston. The work began in the late 1950s, shortly after President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act, which provided 90% Federal funding. Notably by 1963, more than twenty-four miles of highway, stretching from Medford to New Hampshire, was built at a cost of \$47 million dollars. It is telling that the highway isolated Assembly Square from the rest of the well-established neighborhood in East Somerville. By the time this three-mile link was completed in 1973 it had displaced more than 300 Somerville families and 90 businesses. Community groups were successful in delaying construction of the final Somerville leg for many years, but ultimately, they did not prevail against the massive disruption and dislocation it inevitably caused.

Next cross Great River Road to begin exploring Sylvester Baxter Riverfront State Park.

The Sylvester Baxter Park is a State Park overseen by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) that abuts the Mystic River and encompasses 6.1 acres. It was designed by Copley Wolff of Boston and dedicated by Governor Deval Patrick in September 2013. FRIT as the developers of the *Assembly Row* area funded its creation at a cost of \$3.5 million dollars. Mayor Curtatone praised the new park at its dedication saying, "it represents the riverfront our community has always deserved."

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The Park was named in recognition of Sylvester Baxter (1850-1927), a newspaper writer and urban planner in the Boston area. During the 1870s and 1880s, he wrote for the *Boston Herald* and the *Boston Evening Post* and was praised for his coverage of Boston's Great Fire of 1872. Reportedly his thinking about what the "burned district" would look like after the fire sparked his initial interest in urban planning. In 1893 Baxter became the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Metropolitan Park Commission, and together with the well-known landscape architect Charles Elliot, he was a driving force in developing the metropolitan park system of Greater Boston.



Sylvester Baxter, journalist and planner.

Now walk to the pier that extends into the Mystic River to see Somerville's shoreline, extending east from Shore Road at Ten Hills to the Amelia Earhart Dam. These shores rank among the most historic segments of the River.

The Mystic River meanders through the cities of Malden, Medford, Somerville, Everett, Chelsea, and Boston's Charlestown neighborhood. Its name is likely derived from a combination of the Wampanoag word "Muhs-uhug" meaning big river and "Missi-Tuck", an Algonquin word meaning a great river whose waters are driven by waves. The river's broad, impressive confluence with Boston's Inner Harbor suggests a mighty waterway extending many miles into the western hinterlands. However, the Mystic is only seven miles in length, emptying into Lower Mystic Lake which borders the communities of Arlington and Medford. What is truly impressive about the Mystic River is its watershed, which encompasses 76 square miles, and contains 44 lakes and ponds, and associated streams and brooks.

Look to the west, on the other side of the Fellsway Bridge, to see several noteworthy historical sites.

Ten Hills Farm is part of the 600-acre **Estate of John Winthrop**, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He took up residence here in 1631, one year after the founding of Boston. Governor Winthrop's domain extended from Broadway across the Mystic River into Medford. The Puritan leader's house was located near the intersection of today's Shore Road and Governor Winthrop Drive.

Some might say Winthrop's greatest claim to fame is his reference in a sermon to the Boston settlement as "a shining City upon a hill." The quote has since been used by Ronald Reagan and others to portray America as a beacon of hope for the world. Winthrop's message conveyed to his fellow Puritans that the eyes of the world were trained on them, and their success depended on them leading upstanding Christian lives. The irony is that the religious freedom sought by Winthrop and the Puritans was not given to others like the Quakers and the Baptists—some of whom were hung on Boston Common for not following the Colony's proscribed faith!

John Winthrop, first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.



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His farm was owned by a succession of prominent men, including Elias Haskett Derby of Salem and Patrick Tracy Jackson of early Lowell industrial development renown. The last vestiges of Winthrop's "ancient" residence disappeared in 1877. Most of the current residences, however, were built after World War I in the now densely settled Ten Hills neighborhood.

Blessing of the Bay, the first ship built by Europeans in Massachusetts, was constructed here. Built at the behest of Governor John Winthrop, this three-ton vessel was constructed of locust wood by Robert Molton and fellow shipwrights who had settled in Charlestown in 1629. Equipped if necessary to go into battle with an enemy, the Blessing of the Bay was primarily designed to trade with the Dutch in New Amsterdam (later Manhattan), as well as settlements along the coasts of New England and Long Island. The storied ship was lost at sea in 1633 on a trade mission to Virginia.

The Wellington Bridge is part of the Fellsway, a parkway set out in 1897 and rooted in the late 19th century movement for landscaped parkways. The segment of the Fellsway that is carried over the Wellington Bridge and links Somerville with Medford is visible just to the west of the pier. Although today parkways are associated with automobiles, the Fellsway (1895) was originally envisioned as a thoroughfare for urban residents with horse-drawn vehicles intent on escaping the summer heat of the gritty City for the bucolic, brand new parklands of the Middlesex Fells. Located further to the north, in Malden, Melrose and Stoneham, the Fells encompasses woodlands, ponds and rocky highlands. Charles Elliot, a renowned landscape architect, designed the Middlesex Fells, as a partner in the landscape architectural firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Elliot, based in Brookline. The founder of the Olmsted firm was none other than Frederick Law Olmsted who famously planned and set out Central Park in New York City during the 1850s. He was also the creator of Boston's Emerald Necklace Park system beginning in 1876.



Charles Elliot

The Fellsway, from Mystic Avenue and the Wellington Bridge (1875-1878), was intended to be a "pleasure drive" with a landscaped median strip. By the 1920s, however, automobile ownership in the Boston area had become relatively widespread, and by mid-century, the pleasurable aspects of this late Victorian thoroughfare had been compromised by street widenings and adjacent asphalt-paved parking lots.

Looking east from the pier at Baxter State Park, see the upper floors of the Encore Casino complex.

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While located on the opposite shore, in the City of Everett, the Encore Casino and Hotel complex is distinctive due to its siting and design. Encore is the largest single phase construction project in the history of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Begun in 2014 and completed in June 2019, Encore is built on 33 acres of Mystic River waterfront land at the phenomenal cost of \$2.6 billion dollars by Wynn Resorts of Las Vegas, Nevada. The most significant public benefit of the Encore project was the clean-up of its former industrial waterfront at great expense to the Wynn Company.

Not far from the Sylvester Baxter Riverfront State Park, also note several other significant landmarks not visible from the pier.

The Amelia Earhart Dam is an earth-fill dam that extends across the Mystic River from Somerville to Medford. The legislation authorizing the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) to build the Amelia Earhart Dam was passed in 1957, but construction did not take place until the mid-1960s. The purpose was to maintain the river at a constant depth which otherwise ranged from 0 to 13 feet, and to block the incursion of salt water into the upstream river basin. The dam was constructed with three locks for marine traffic, the largest being 325 feet long and 45 feet wide, while the two smaller locks are 120 feet long and 22 feet wide. There is no public access to the dam, and in 1976, it was connected to a new pumping station to help alleviate flooding during high storm tides.



Amelia Earhart in 1937, Oakland, California.

The dam is named in honor of the aviation pioneer whose plane disappeared in the South Pacific in 1937. Earhart was the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Among many achievements, she set many other records, was one of the first aviators to promote commercial air travel and wrote best-selling books about her flying experiences. In addition, she was instrumental in the formation of The Ninety-Nines, an organization for female pilots. She lived in nearby Medford in the 1920s.

Draw Seven Park is located just to the east of the Amelia Earhart Dam. By the mid-1960s, MDC planners were beginning to envision parkland along the Mystic River that would echo Boston's Esplanade and other landscaped Charles River shores. The Draw Seven Park was created in 1992 by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) and the MBTA at the urging of the City of Somerville. The intent was to restore natural open space, improve and create trail connections, and increase climate resiliency. The successor to the MDC, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), is currently developing a schematic design for the Park that

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is encompassed within the Mystic River State Reservation. Once complete, the project will connect ten miles of continuous parkland along the Mystic River. Originally construction was anticipated to begin in the fall of 2020 and be completed by 2022. The Park is named after a Boston and Maine railroad bridge known as Drawbridge No.7 (no longer extant) that dated back to the 1840s and once occupied part of this site.

Continue eastward in Baxter Park to stop at the Amphitheater.

The amphitheater is a key feature of the Baxter State Park designed by Copley Wolff Design Group of Boston. Amphitheaters hark back to ancient times in Greece and Rome and are usually circular or oval, with tiers of seats rising from a central open area that usually function as a public performance stage. The big metal trusses that mark the entry were reclaimed from the Central Steel building that was once a stalwart in the Assembly Square district and now serve as important vestiges, connecting the area's proud industrial past to the present.



Walk further eastward to the Winter Hill Yacht Club.

Organized in 1912, the **Winter Hill Yacht Club** is a rare survivor of the early 20th century shoreline when the landscape was dominated by industrial uses but also offered some recreational activities. At one time, on the west side of the Wellington Bridge (circa 1907) there was a public bathing facility here (no longer extant) under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Parks Commission (MPC). The Winter Hill Yacht Club dates to the heyday of yacht clubs (1866-1930) that dotted the shores of Boston Harbor and its affiliated waterways, including the yacht clubs of South Boston, Dorchester, and Winthrop.

It is notable that the water quality of the Mystic has been significantly improving over the past 40 years, in large part due to the regional efforts of the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA). Herring runs and boating are making a come-back, though swimming is still not recommended.

Turn right onto Artisan Way and proceed to the eastern end of Point Park for the final stop on this walk.

The tour ends in the part of Assembly Row that perhaps best illustrates the type of 'smart growth' principles widely espoused by local transportation and city planners. This approach advocates compact, transit-oriented, pedestrian- and biker-friendly land use that incorporates complete streets and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.

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Here **Point Park** is an open square reminiscent of an amenity typically found in old European city centers. The Park is surrounded by buildings whose forms, materials, and decorative elements echo the type of urban design found throughout America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The wide



diversity of uses -- retail, office, hotel, and residential units -- plus a twelve-screen cinema complex and numerous restaurants and gathering places for pop ups -- ensures that the area remains vibrant, during both daytime and evening hours.

In addition, the new transit station on the Orange Line achieved the goal of making the overall Assembly Square easily accessible to workers and residents, as well as to visitors of the public. The **Assembly Square T Station** opened in September 2014 and was the first new station on the MBTA subway system in over a quarter of a century!

Finally, stop to consider the whimsical tall giraffe providing creative cheer in front of the Legoland Discovery Center. Tessie was created in 2014 out of 22,000 Duplo blocks, a larger version of Lego bricks designed to be safe for younger children. He was renamed Gio in April 2017 in memory of six-year-old Giovanni Maggiore of Medford who loved Giraffes.



Enjoy exploring further and thank you for participating in this short walking tour!

The Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) was established in 1985 by City Ordinance to administer historic districts, advise historic property owners, and provide historic and technical information. The Commission also sponsors events and develops programs and written materials as part of its public outreach and educational materials. The Staff can be reached via historic@somervillema.gov or 617-625-6600, ext. 2500 or [Historic Events and Education | City of Somerville \(somervillema.gov\)](http://Historic%20Events%20and%20Education%20|%20City%20of%20Somerville%20(somervillema.gov))

