

AH 2-1840



## AMERICAN JOURNEYS

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Somerville Community Schools

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## Notes on Somerville

The immigration surge which the city is currently experiencing can be compared to the waves of immigrants who came to Somerville in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The changes which the city's population is facing are significant, and the resulting tensions and hostilities an unfortunate result of people fearful of foreign cultures and perceived negative impacts. Somerville historically has been a city of immigrants, and as a result there is much to be learned from its history.

Somerville had been a part of Charlestown during colonial times, but separated in 1842. This area, called "Beyond the Neck," was altered from a farm village to a commuter suburb in a relatively short period of time, became industrialized and developed a diverse population. The first mayor, George O. Brastow was inaugurated in 1872. When incorporated, Somerville contained less than 200 dwellings (1886 United States Census.)

The city changed rapidly as Boston became more cosmopolitan and the construction of buildings changed from using wood to brick. As a result, Somerville became a major brick-making center. The clay in the city's soil was superior for this purpose. As was true in other suburbs of the area, the industries of Somerville developed to support the growing needs of Boston and New England in general. Industries which quickly developed in this city included a bleachery, pottery plant, grist mill, a distillery, iron works, and a cordage manufacturer. The construction of railroad lines through Somerville expanded the accessibility of other regions to this area and brought in further commerce, accelerating the city's economic and residential growth. As a result of this increase of industries and job opportunities, Somerville became an attractive place in which to settle.

Laborers from Ireland and British Canada flocked to the city in search of jobs and a good living, as did poor farmers from other parts of New England. Tensions quickly mounted as this wave of immigration pitted Protestants against Catholics. The demand for labor welcomed the immigrants, however native residents were resentful of this perceived encroachment. Although Irish immigrants first settled in Charlestown, Somerville quickly attracted a large number to its brickyards and railyards. This was an attractive suburb with inexpensive housing and plentiful jobs. In 1885 (not yet a city) Irish immigrants comprised 22 percent of the population. A handful of black people established residence in Somerville from 1850 to 1870 (Avenues to Adulthood page 9.) A class system evolved as the farming community was replaced by an industrial workforce with both white collar and blue collar workers. With the establishment of a stable workforce and growing community a middle class population of professionals and skilled craftspeople emerged. City-identified residents became concerned about the quality of the city, participating in civic activities and becoming politically involved.

Country of Origin of Somerville's Population	1855		1885	
	N	%	N	%
United States	4,171	72	22,471	75
English Canada	160	3	2,329	8
Ireland	1,305	22	3,431	11
England, Scotland Wales	128	2	949	3
Germany, Holland	27	--	195	1
France	8	--	?	--
Italy	2	--	78	--
Sweden, Norway	--	--	136	--
Other Countries	5	--	382	1
Total	5,806		29,971	

As the city expanded and people remained, the second generation population grew and established themselves in city life. A number of intermarriages occurred though still the tensions were prevalent. The second generation Irish climbed the social ladder and emerged as leaders in the community, often pitted against the older Yankee families. Irish immigrants arriving in the latter part of the century found an established community with better jobs and a well organized social system. In 1885 20% of all Irish-born male employees had white collar posts and 25% skilled trades. Boston only had 10% of their Irish in white collar professions (Avenues to Adulthood page 68) so Somerville showed a better working climate with more advantages for immigrants looking to make it into the middle class.

Somerville continued to prosper and developed new industries which served Boston's as well as New England's needs. Aside from the industries which had already become firmly established, others made their homes here. The eastern fringe of the city was the site of New England's largest meat packing and dressing industries. In 1898, Somerville was the third largest slaughtering city in the United States (Beyond the Neck page 37). The city was also home to the Fresh Pond Ice Company, the Derby Desk Company, American Brass Tube Works, the Leavitt and Henderson Carriage Manufactory, West Somerville Moulding Mill, the Cushman Shade Roller Manufacturer, the Carr Jewelry and Novelty Company, the Union Glass Company (the only glass manufacturer in the Boston area) and the Hurn Carpet Cleaning Company (largest in New England) (Avenues to Adulthood page 69.) The expansion of industry required hundreds of people to work in unskilled as well as skilled positions.

Employed persons by occupation: 1850, 1860

Occupation	Year	Number	Percent
High White Collar	1850	21	6.9
	1860	17	3.6
Low White Collar	1850	70	23.2
	1860	130	27.8
Skilled	1850	95	31.6
	1860	127	27.1
Semiskilled	1850	16	5.4
	1860	119	25.4
Unskilled	1850	99	32.9
	1860	75	16.0

(Charts are from Avenues to Adulthood, by Reed Ueda, pp 9 & 68 for the Country of Origin & p 12 for Occupations)

With the introduction of the street railways, a working suburb was created which further attracted a wide variety of people looking for a community which allowed easy commute to work. In 1887 the street car system expanded to West Somerville, which resulted in an increase in population for this part of the city. Somerville was therefore an ideal setting for working-class people who required affordable housing and plentiful jobs, in an area which provided an inexpensive transportation system.

The resentment of Yankee society increased. They saw their traditional control withering away as the Irish, especially became more prominent and had more of a presence in the city, now also politically. "The nativist wing of the local Republican organization suspected that the influx of Irish Catholics was part of a design by priests seeking to win the suburbs surrounding Boston for the Pope." (Avenues to Adulthood page 71.) However, as the Irish moved outwards from Boston they pushed Yankee families in front of them, so that in fact Somerville maintained a Yankee majority. The fact that Somerville had a good school system and supported a middle class population was attractive to the Yankee "immigrants."

As the city developed, a conflict arose between those who wanted to preserve the traditional aspects of the city and the newcomers. Open space was being gobbled up by developers building low cost housing on the city's low priced land. Inexpensive houses of poor quality built on small lots went up rapidly. Somerville had become a congested city, whose roads and municipal services did not support the large population. There were complaints that Somerville was inferior to Cambridge and other cities in the area, and that by allowing newcomers in, the quality of the city was deteriorating. "In the 1880's social clubs interested in the growth and improvement of Somerville lobbied for ordinances which would restrict setback, control density and encourage builders not to construct the same house plan repeatedly." (Beyond the Neck page 37.) The result was constant tension between those who had previously settled and were well established in the city with those who were coming in, who were attracted to the low cost of living. The conflict between the haves and the have nots has been a constant theme and describes the clash between classes and heritages. Immigrants were seen as people who were keeping the city back, and not adding to the quality of city life. Between 1880 and 1890 Somerville's population almost doubled from 24,933 to 40,152. By 1888 a serious housing shortage occurred (Beyond the Neck page 39) and as a result the city required several hundred low cost houses to be built to accommodate the influx of people.

The immigration of Irish was followed in the late nineteenth century by a new working-class population of Eastern Europeans, Greeks and Italians. The next significant wave was Portuguese. Many of these immigrants settled in East Somerville where housing was more affordable. Immigrant groups composed 64% of the city in 1920 and 70% in 1930. (Avenues to Adulthood page 204.) Somerville's population reached 103,908 in 1930 and peaked at 105,813 during World War II. In 1930 the foreign born (first generation) population totalled 29,548. Among well represented new groups were 553 Russians, 421 Greeks, 5,039 Italians, 1,240 Portuguese, and 115 persons born in Armenia, Palestine, Syria or Turkey. Irish immigrants totalled 5,800 and there were 10,069

Canadians. Somerville's black population had grown slightly to 328 by 1920 but dropped to 274 in 1930 (Beyond the Neck page 51.) In 1930 Somerville became the most densely settled community in Massachusetts and one of the most densely settled in the country.

### The Present

In the 1980's Somerville is attracting a large number of new immigrants to its city. These people include Spanish speaking people from Central America, Puerto Rico and other areas; Portuguese speakers from the Azores, Brazil, the Portuguese mainland and from former Portuguese colonies in Africa; Haitians; and Southeast Asians. A total of ten to fifteen thousand new residents have added to the city's population by these groups in the last ten years.

Throughout its history, Somerville has been a city of immigrants. It has developed the traditional pattern of people looking for an hospitable place in which to live only to face barriers from the previous settlers who are well established and who have grown distant to their own history of struggle and assimilation. As a result, some members of the assimilated older immigrant population are hostile to newcomers. Somerville is affected by global politics with newcomers coming for a variety of reasons. Economic need and the promise of the United States still bring people to this country. Political oppression is a phenomenon which has forced people to look to the United States for refuge from the tyranny of their homelands. Many come with the thought that their stay is temporary, that they will be able to return home one day.

The factors affecting current immigrants are historical:

- "In the face of major immigration, previously arrived residents have become anxious about the security of their jobs and their homes. Fear and prejudice have resulted in overt discrimination and occasionally in episodes of violence directed at immigrants.

- Newly arrived immigrants have taken the lowest paying jobs, sometimes jobs which better established workers would reject, and frequently have worked longer hours on the average than natives. Historically, immigrant labor has been of great benefit to the Somerville economy, supporting for example the brickmaking and meat packing industries of the city's past.

- Newcomers have placed special burdens on municipal services, particularly schools due to language barriers, health problems and the difficulties of adapting to a new culture. But these burdens have typically been transient, being much reduced by the second generation.

- Assimilation, at least in an economic sense has been rapid for most of Somerville's immigrants. While many immigrant groups have retained their cultural identity, significant differences between natives and newcomers in income, housing quality and other indicators of economic success have tended to become less significant by the second generation."

(City of Somerville; Minority and Immigrant Needs Assessment p 2)

"Like other major population shifts, this immigration has had complex internal demographics; each specific in-moving group has grown in its own unique pattern. In the Portuguese community, stable immigration in the Azorean population has been joined by the explosive development of a new Brazilian population, principally undocumented. Among Spanish-speaking subgroups, the established, numerically dominant Puerto Rican-Caribbean population has grown through immigration, but has also been augmented by an influx of Central Americans, overwhelmingly undocumented victims of political turmoil in El Salvador. Haitians have moved to Somerville principally from Cambridge and Boston, although now that some families are established they are bringing friends and relatives directly from Haiti. The Somerville Southeast Asian population, which is predominantly Vietnamese, has also tended to move in from other cities." (City of Somerville; Minority and Immigrant Needs Assessment page 82.)

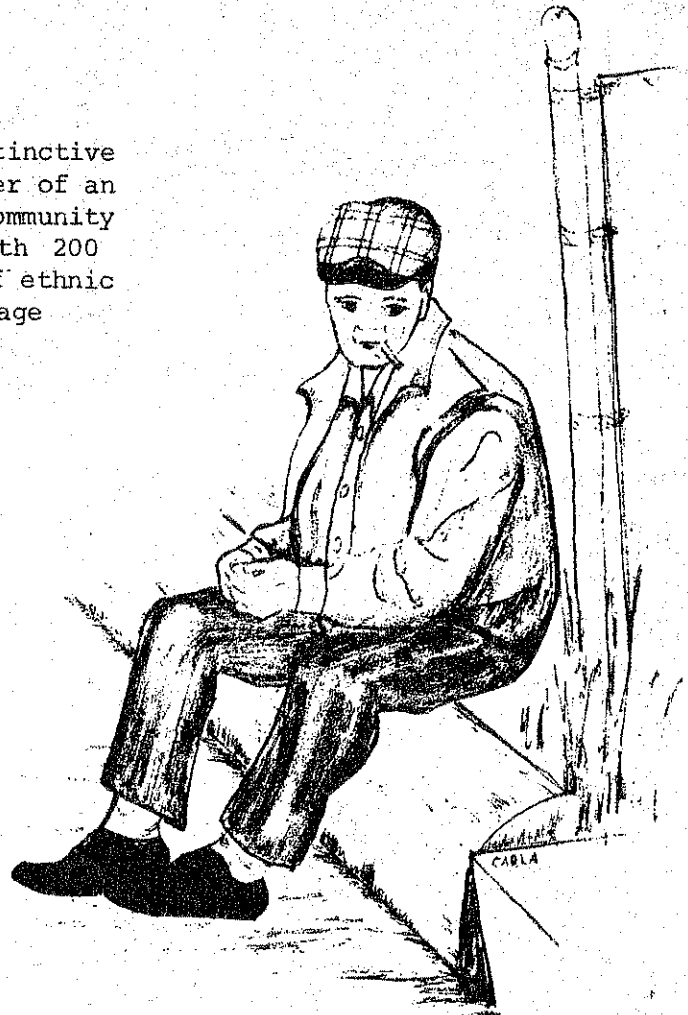
Although it would appear that the obstacles and problems faced by newcomers are insurmountable, the situation they are escaping from is often much worse. People are fleeing for their lives, away from homelands which are brutal and offer no escape from poverty and persecution. Somerville, with all its problems offers some hope to people. The current wave of immigration is significant and poses a challenge to old time residents and newcomers alike to find ways in which to come together and create a more hospitable city for all. The policy makers and leaders of the city need to be well versed on the issues and prepared to lead the city towards workable solutions.

There is much need for sensitivity and for understanding why people are coming here and what they are facing in this new and alien culture. There is much to learn from these people who come with cultures and life experiences which can enrich American life. Hurdles are clearly present to be overcome. Limited services and resources can place a strain on the community. However, a city which has a history of immigration has a responsibility to look at this history, to appreciate the roots of its citizenry and to learn from its past. The growth and development of this country is the result of the people who came from many lands, who helped shape this city and others across our nation. Somerville continues to be a city of immigrants.

# UNDER THE INTERSTATE

*come meet some of us*

the distinctive  
character of an  
urban community  
rich with 200  
years of ethnic  
heritage



Carla Johnston with the aid of J.Thiele, M.Ghioni,  
A.Pangrazzi, K.Crowley, R.Poulin, J.Pangounis,  
H.Hughes, and L.Marcellino.

## *"city options"*

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-- Most of the tribes here were ruled until 1616 by Nanepashemet, first husband of Squaw Sachem. Later, the Pawtuckets controlled Charlestown and nearby territory.

In 1628 the Plymouth Council gave "Charlestown Without the Neck" (Somerville-- beyond the neck caused by the Charles, Mystic, and Miller Rivers) to Massachusetts Bay Company. Some Puritan immigrants had already settled here. In 1639, this territory was formally deeded to these inhabitants. In subsequent years settlers farmed, fished, hunted, and began a number of small industries.

Friction between colonists and the British whose tyranny colonists resented grew until September 1774, when the British in a first hostile act stole the gun powder from the powder house. Tension escalated into a revolution; the results are summarized in the quote from the Declaration of Independence in the last chapter of this book.

Persons of many nationalities came here in subsequent years. Many of those have moved on across the country.

This book captures the essence of our current community--the major groups who are here now because their relatives arrived here in the 19th and 20th centuries.

\* \* \* \* \*

The original follows: --

"The 15th of the 2d Mo. 1639.

Web-Cowet, & Squaw Sachem do  
to the Inhabitants of the Towne of  
towne, all the land within the  
anted them by the Court," etc.

describing the territory deeded,  
thus: --

I acknowledge to have received  
atisfaction, twenty and one coats,  
a fathom of wampom, three bushels  
e. In witness whereof we have  
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rove named.

e marke of the Squa Sachem  
e marke of Web Cowet  
scribed in the presence off  
Humphrey  
ert feake."

shortly after their arrival the new  
pushed out farther into the coun-  
arch of arable land, or for trading  
e Indians, and laid out roads  
frections. The earliest highway  
bably what is now Washington  
om Charlestown Neck to Harvard  
or when Boston was settled, in  
e highway was already in exist-

--C.J.

-- The Irish first began coming to the U.S. between 1820 and 1830; most arrived between 1850 and 1900. They came to escape poverty.

After the first World War the Irish community lived mostly in East Somerville. Sullivan Square and the playground across the street were meeting places for the Irish who lived in Somerville and Charlestown. At first, many of the Irish men lived in boarding houses; most of the women lived in homes in the Back Bay and the suburbs of Brookline, Brighton, and West Somerville.

There was a meeting house in East Somerville on "new" Cross Street. Besides this meeting house, the Irish attended the Broadway Theatre or walked to Brick Bottom for a bottle on weekends, or attended a dance on Dudley Street in Boston. Another form of social life was meeting in a friend's house, to which they brought food or "sweets" for everyone to eat while the music was playing and people were dancing.

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Calvin Sawyer's grandfather fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill. He died in 1893 at the age of 80--one of Somerville's Black citizens.

The Black population of Somerville has never numbered much over 1 percent. But it is a unique community. Many of the Black families have had relatives here since shortly after the Civil War. This city was then an elegant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant suburb of Boston--large estates and a comfortable walk into the city.

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Today the Black population is well estab-  
lished--by no means wealthy, but able to own  
their own homes and live in comfort. Many of  
their children have finished high school and  
college.

Racial/ethnic discrimination does occur  
and somehow is harder to escape when it's a  
matter of skin color rather than ethnic cul-  
tural differences. However, while it's the  
conflicts between Blacks and blue collar Whites  
which make the news, the other side of the  
coin is that in quiet neighborhoods, on an  
individual basis, people seem to place their  
personal concerns and their common economic  
situation above other tensions.

Just don't try to take away any of the  
well being or status any of the minority groups  
are working so hard to achieve.

\* \* \* \* \*

-- The nickname the early Greeks gave to  
Somerville was the "brick-making city."

The first Greeks started arriving in  
1902. The first group were four brothers by  
the name of Chakalis.

Unlike other immigrant groups who came  
with their families, the Greek immigrants up  
to about 1911 were 95 percent male. This was  
because of the scarcity of money in their  
families. Thus the young men would make the  
trip to the United States in order to raise  
money, send the money back to their families  
and thus enable more of their relatives to  
come to the United States.

Linwood Street soon became the center of Somerville's Greek colony, and in 1907 Costas Kacoyannis's "bakaliko" or grocery store at 78 Linwood Street was the hub of activity. The address "78 Linwood Street" was possessed by many immigrants and it was the checking-in point for the newly arrived.

The Balkan Wars of 1912 between Greeks and Turks destroyed the likelihood of Asia Minor natives' returning to their homeland. These wars caused the persecution and displacement of thousands of Greeks, most of whom found their way to America.

On November 28, 1923, the Somerville Herald featured an article, "Greek Catholics to have their own Church." The correction "Orthodox" took the place of the word "Catholic." This showed how little recognized was the Greek Orthodox religion outside the Greek community. Once the Greeks had acquired their own church which united them, however, they started to intermingle and have relations with the immigrants from other countries. They had come in contact with them, of course, at various meat packing houses where they were employed. Records show that the Greeks had the closest relations with the Irish immigrants. In 1924 and again in 1942, the "Old Bennetts," an Irish organization, was to toast the Greeks: "To our splendid fellow citizens--the Greeks of Brick Bottom."

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Canadians are the largest heritage group in Somerville--22 percent of the population. Most emigrated from the Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland) out of poor fishing villages, towns, or farms. They came to Ten Hills and got jobs on the railroad, or

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conditions, towns, or farms. They came  
to America and got jobs on the railroad, or

to North Cambridge and Somerville to work in  
the brickyards. Brick Bottom, near Charlestown,  
had several brickyards. (The meatpacking houses  
and the row houses and other structures on  
Beacon Hill were built with Somerville bricks.)  
Many came because they had relatives already  
established here who boasted of the advantages  
of such a fine country, so close by and easily  
accessible.

Since Canadians already felt they were  
North Americans, many preferred to become  
naturalized citizens after spending most of  
their lives in Somerville. The transition to  
a new country was a lot easier for most Cana-  
dians than for many other immigrants because  
there was no language barrier for most of them.  
They were well accepted in Somerville, suffering  
little or no prejudice or discrimination.  
(A Black Canadian was told by an American  
customs official to be sure to tell people he  
was Canadian.)

They were really integrated into the  
"melting pot." Although local customs, songs,  
and dances were evident in the twenties and  
thirties, these have practically disappeared.  
Canadians have not left as distinctive a mark  
on Somerville's culture as many other smaller  
ethnic groups because of their assimilation.

Younger Canadians, recent arrivals, seem  
to look on life here as a mixture of oppor-  
tunity and disadvantages. The quiet, clean-  
liness, and slower pace of Canadian cities  
and towns are missed; the contrasts with  
Somerville's pollution, congestion, and  
crowded housing situation are marked. The  
lack of respect for authority and others is  
also noted. Yet living in Somerville still

provides a better salary and easier access to institutions of higher learning. Many do desire to return to Canada, however, which they see as an escape to a slower pace of life where basic values are still upheld.

\* \* \* \* \*

-- The Italian immigrants were frequently men of the soil. Without many technical skills and a knowledge of the English language, they preferred to live in the cities, where they could find ready employment, receive wages at the end of the week, and be in the company of their compatriots. They brought with them perseverance and a willingness to work. In some cases, they entered the textile mills of Massachusetts and stood up well to the rough work to such an extent that their bosses asked if they knew others who needed employment. Naturally, the Italians sought out their fellow countrymen.

The Italian community of Somerville is the product of immigration from Italy proper as well as immigration from other sections of the United States, predominately other cities of the Northeast. Only with the great influx of Italians during the 1930's did there develop any real sense of an Italian community, which looked to and reinforced the culture it had brought from Europe. From the villages of Tuscany, Abruzzo, Cammnia, Pugril, Sicily, and many other locations came many individuals, with their families or to be joined by them later, to realize a better life in America.

They arrived in New York or Boston with agrarian skills or technical expertise, which were to be employed in making a living as sculpturers, realtors, bilingual teachers,

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waiters, or businessmen/shopkeepers. As little  
by little Italians settled in the "Blue City,"  
they wrote to friends in their old villages  
in the old country, pointing out the benefits  
of moving to the United States, and in particu-  
lar to Somerville itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Portuguese began to arrive in the United  
States, and especially Somerville, during and  
after the second World War. Most individuals  
did not come from mainland Portugal, but rather  
from the Azorian islands of St. Maria, St.  
Michael, Isle of Terceira, Pico, Faial, and  
Flouret. They gave up a secure, quiet, yet  
sometimes isolated country village life with  
religion frequently at its center for the hope  
of setting up better homes, and eventually buying  
their own homes, in the cities of the Northeast.  
They had as their goal the hope of realizing  
a better life for themselves and especially  
their children. They were drawn to America  
by attractive opportunities of free education  
for their children.

They immigrated from the Azores, leaving  
behind their occupations as farmers and fisher-  
men with little likelihood of being able to  
follow the vocations of their fathers. Rather  
than make a living on a self-sufficient yet  
small farm, Portuguese moved here to find  
work in the numerous factories, mills, and shops  
of the Boston area. After overcoming the  
usual hurdle of the new immigrant, the language  
barrier, they proved their worth and eventually  
were rewarded by promotions.

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Since the 1960's, Boston's fastest-  
growing group of immigrants has been Haitians.  
They have come largely to escape political

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persecution on their island, where in the late sixties half the national budget was spent on the police force.

Many of those who come are the French-speaking upper classes, the first victims of political oppression.

While numbers of persons in Boston have increased quickly, the population has remained largely invisible because of a fear of becoming vocal, language difficulties with Creole or French, and lack of familiarity with American culture.

Can the others in our society possibly remember what it was like for their group to be the "new immigrants"? Can we remember, and can we celebrate and develop our options as a rich, dynamic community--not just a gray urban area under the Interstate?

\* \* \* \* \*