

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
80 BOYLSTON STREET  
BOSTON, MA 02116

143

Town Somerville

Address 125 Highland Avenue

Historic Name First Universalist Church

Use: Present religious

Original religious

DESCRIPTION

Date 1916-1923

Source Tucci, Built in Boston, p.171

Style Italian Romanesque

Architect Ralph Adams Cram

Exterior Wall Fabric brick, stucco, terra cotta

Outbuildings none

Major Alterations (with dates) none

Condition good

Moved no Date n/a

Acreage less than one acre

Setting North side of Highland, heavily traveled route, with residential and commercial surrounds, office space late 19th c. housing and new construction

Recorded by Gretchen G. Schuler

Organization Mass. Historical Commission

Date September, 1988

Photo (3"x3" or 3"x5", black and white) Indicate address of property on back of photo. Staple to left side of form.

Sketch Map: Draw map showing property's location in relation to nearest cross streets and/or geographical features. Indicate all buildings between inventoried property and nearest intersection(s). Indicate north

See Attached Assessor's Map

UTM REFERENCE Z 19 E 327/020 N 4694/740

USGS QUADRANGLE Boston, North

SCALE 1:25,000

## **NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA STATEMENT (if applicable)**

The First Universalist Church retains integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, and association with the early 20th century religious community of Somerville. It is the only local example of work by well known architect Ralph Adams Cram. The First Universalist Church fulfills Criteria A and C of the National Register of Historic Places on the local level.

## **ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE Describe important architectural features and evaluate in terms of other buildings within the community.**

The First Universalist Church, built from 1916 to 1923, is an example of a Romanesque design with the Gothic cruciform plan and an attached side tower. Although it is described by Douglas Tucci (Built in Boston) as "uniformly bland" the use of brick, stucco and terra cotta adds variety to the unadorned architectural detail. The Romanesque windows, the stringcourses of the tower, and the buttresses all with brick and terra cotta trim are the only elements of decoration. There is one rondelle of stained glass on the west facade that adds variety and interest to the design.

## **HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE Explain the role owners played in local or state history and how the building relates to the development of the community.**

Built on Central Hill the First Universalist Church was the last major church built in this area. Highland Avenue, originally part of an old route known as "Barberry Land" or "Middle Way" extended only to Central Street until 1870 when it was continued to Davis Square. It was the site of civic buildings, several churches of large congregations, and of large single family homes.

The First Universalist Church was the last large church to be built in the area and is situated diagonally across Highland Avenue from the Hartwell and Richardson designed First Unitarian Church. Well known architect Ralph Adams Cram, who is known as one of the foremost designers of Gothic architecture in America, designed the First Universalist Church a deviation from his usual style for religious and institutional buildings.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES**

Tucci, Douglas, Built in Boston, p.171.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

Multiple Resource Area  
Thematic Group

Name Somerville MPS  
State Middlesex County, MASSACHUSETTS

Nomination/Type of Review

Date/Signature

21. Crowell, C.C., House

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

22. Downer Rowhouses (Adams Street)

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

23. Downer Rowhouses (Central Street)

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

24. First Unitarian Church

Substantive Review

for Keeper Beth L. Savage 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

25. First Universalist Church

for Keeper Beth L. Savage 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

26. Foster, Alexander, House

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

27. Gaut, Samuel, House

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

28. Grandview, The

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

29. Highland, The

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

30. Hollander Blocks

Entered in the  
National Register

for Keeper Aelores Byers 9/18/89

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: First Universalist Church

MULTIPLE NAME: Somerville MPS

STATE & COUNTY: MASSACHUSETTS, Middlesex

DATE RECEIVED: 8/04/89 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 8/15/89  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 8/31/89 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 9/18/89  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 89001262

NOMINATOR: STATE

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: Y NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT  RETURN  REJECT 9/18/89 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

*Well preserved design of eminent ecclesiastical architect Ralph Adams Cram. This was the last large church building constructed in the Central Hill neighborhood, the civic/institutional core of the neighborhood, thus signaling the close to a community chapter of Somerville's institutional development.*

RECOM./CRITERIA Accept A+C  
REVIEWER Swase  
DISCIPLINE Architectural History  
DATE 9/18/89

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

---

CLASSIFICATION

count       resource type

---

STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

---

FUNCTION

historic       current

---

DESCRIPTION

architectural classification  
 materials  
 descriptive text

---

SIGNIFICANCE

Period      Areas of Significance--Check and justify below

Specific dates      Builder/Architect  
Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

summary paragraph  
 completeness  
 clarity  
 applicable criteria  
 justification of areas checked  
 relating significance to the resource  
 context  
 relationship of integrity to significance  
 justification of exception  
 other

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

acreage       verbal boundary description  
 UTM's       boundary justification

---

ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTATION/PRESENTATION

sketch maps     USGS maps     photographs     presentation

---

OTHER COMMENTS

Questions concerning this nomination may be directed to

\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



125 Highland Ave

1. 125 Highland Avenue
2. Somerville, MA
3. C. Zelle
4. 1984
5. Somerville City Hall
6. looking northeast
7. # 143

First Universalist Church  
Somerville MA, MA

Please refer to the map in the  
Multiple Property Cover Sheet  
for this property

Multiple Property Cover Sheet Reference Number: 64500253