Inventory No: SMV.65  
Historic Name: West Somerville Branch Library  
Common Name: West Somerville Andrew Carnegie Branch Library  
Address: 40 College Ave  
City/Town: Somerville  
Village/Neighborhood: Davis Square  
Local No: 100, 127, 16-F-16  
Year Constructed: 1909  
Architect(s): McLean and Wright  
Architectural Style(s): Classical Revival  
Use(s): Community Center; Library  
Significance: Architecture; Community Planning; Education  
Area(s): SMV.AY: Somerville Multiple Resource Area  
Designation(s): Local Historic District (03/11/1985); Nat'l Register MRA (09/18/1989); Nat'l Register Individual Property (09/18/1989); Preservation Restriction (06/17/2004)  
Building Materials(s): Roof: Asphalt Shingle  
Wall: Brick; Limestone; Stone, Cut  
Foundation: Brick

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Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Massachusetts Historical Commission  
220 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, Massachusetts 02125  
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

This file was accessed on: Friday, May 15, 2020 at 11:32 AM
FORM B – BUILDING

Massachusetts Historical Commission
Massachusetts Archives Building
220 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, Massachusetts 02125

Photograph
(3" x 3" or 3-1/2" x 5" black and white only) Label photo on back with town and property address. Record film roll and negative numbers here on the form. Staple photo to left side of form over this space. Attach additional photos to continuation sheets.

Roll  Negative(s)
2a,5a,7a,8
886 a,9a
85

Sketch Map

Recorded by Carole Zellie; Brandon Wilson

Organization  Landscape Research; Somerville HPC
Director

Date (month / year) 12/80; 9/04

Follow Massachusetts Historical Commission Survey Manual instructions for completing this form.
BUILDING FORM

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION □ see continuation sheet
Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.

Architecturally, the library is a prime example of the Neo-classical style, and resembles the late-Italian Renaissance Villa Capra by Palladio. The design of McLean and Wright, a Boston based architectural firm, was chosen from among 35 competitive submissions for the building. This unique and artistic Roman Revival public facility was constructed in 1909. The Library is 1 and 1/2 stories high with two curved bay windows symmetrically placed on either side of the entrance portico. This entranceway is ornamented with a triangular pediment carried by fluted Ionic columns and broad pilasters. The yellow brick structure with distinguishing limestone quoins, lintels, sills and belt coursing also has a detailed dentilled cornice which carries around the building, into a full raking cornice. The two rounded bays projecting from the side facades of the building house a pair of generous reading rooms, complete with working fireplaces. Lamps of learning adorn the cornice and an acroterian is located at the pinnacle of the roof. The pediment is further ornamented with an open book surrounded by a laurel wreath, the ancient symbol of victory. Vines and flowers spring from the book in reference to reading as the root that leads to the flowering of civilization. Similar examples of the Neoclassical style elsewhere in Somerville have been altered.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE □ see continuation sheet
Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.

The West Somerville Branch Library was listed on the State Register of Historic Places in 1986 and on the National Register in 1989. In 1989, it was also designated as being located within an historic multiple resource area, Davis Square. The Library opened in 1909 and retains integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, and feeling, as well as associations with Somerville’s municipal building program and extreme growth at the turn of the century.

Historically, the Library maintains local, regional and national associations. Its local and regional importance derives from its connection to Samuel Walter Foss, who headed the Somerville library system during a time when its circulation in the State was second only to Boston. Known as a progressive librarian, Mr. Foss introduced the concept of open stacks to the City, renewal by mail and telephone, the loaning of books to other civic institutions, such as schools, churches and prisons, and many other activities. He was also a recognized author and poet, most notably of “The House by the Side of the Road,” as well as a strong civic leader.

Of national interest is the Library’s association with the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie, who donated $25,000 for the Library’s construction in 1908. The finished building is a clear example of the "Greek Temples of Learning" design which Carnegie stopped funding shortly after this Library’s erection. The bequest of Carnegie funds had a major impact on the development of the public library system, as fully half of the public libraries in the nation today were started as Carnegie libraries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES □ see continuation sheet
Miscellaneous newspaper clippings, West Somerville Branch Library files, and Carnegie Libraries, Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development by George S. Bobinski.
Major Alterations

2003-2004  With partial funding from the Massachusetts Historical Commission Preservation Projects Fund, the City of Somerville undertook major stabilization work on the exterior, including: masonry cleaning & repairs (repointing or repair of brick walls, rebuilding chimneys, and resetting of architectural elements), repair of downspouts, reinforcement of roof structure, window restoration on the upper floor and weather stripping, and repainting of windows and tympanum. Interior work included: repair and stabilization of walls and ceilings, repainting of two of the three first floor reading rooms and the stairwell consistent with historic colors, and wallpapering of a small reference room with period wallpaper. This project completes the exterior weatherproofing phase of the restoration of the West Somerville Library. Further interior restoration is required, as well as repair of flaking walls in the basement and on the second floor. Upgrades to the electrical and HVAC systems, and building accessibility are still needed.

As a component of the project, the City of Somerville authorized an investigation into the interior historic finishes by Preservation Consultants Sara Chase and Bill Finch. This investigation revealed the detailed stenciling done at the time of construction around the walls and ceilings of the reading rooms and stairwell. Also revealed were the original historic paint colors for the interior of the Library. Based upon these findings the City decided to incorporate some of these colors into the repainting of the main entry, two reading rooms and the stairwell. The detailed report in color entitled “Documentation of Original Decorative Painting in Selected Rooms and Vestibules,” June 2004 will be kept on file at the office of the City’s Historic Preservation Commission for restoration purposes when the City has sufficient funding to complete the historic color scheme.
ORM B - BUILDING

ASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
0 BOYLSTON STREET
BOSTON, MA 02116

AREA
FORM NO.

West Somerville
West 65

Lex
40 College Avenue

Historic Name
West Somerville Branch Library

Present
Library

Original
Library

DESCRIPTION

Year 1909

Source plans

Style Neoclassical

Architect McLean and Wright, Boston

Exterior Wall Fabric smooth-faced granite

Outbuildings none

Major Alterations (with dates) none

Condition Excellent

Moved no Date n/a

Acreage less than one acre

Setting The library is located on a major roadway leading to Davis Square in West Somerville

Commercial and institutional surrounds

 Recorded by Betsy Friedberg, Preservation Planner

Organization Mass. Historical Commission

Date June 1985
The handsomely detailed West Somerville Branch Library retains integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, and feeling, as well as associations with Somerville's municipal building program and extreme growth at the turn of the century. Somerville's most intact example of the Neo-classical style, the building fulfills Criteria A and C of the National Register of Historic Places on the local level.

This small branch library is one of Somerville's best conserved examples of the Neo-classical style. The fine entrance portico is composed of a triangular pediment carried by Ionic columns and broad pilasters. A modillioned cornice is carried around the building, and into the full raking cornice. Urns and acroteria finish the pediment. Built of smooth-cut granite, the building is 1 1/2 stories in height and three bays wide; it is capped by a shallow hipped roof. Similar examples of the various expressions of the Neo-classical elsewhere in Somerville have been altered.

The West Somerville Branch Library was opened in 1909, during the administration of librarian Samuel Walter Foss, noted poet and author of the "House By the Side of the Road." The West Somerville branch originated in a store in Davis Square, and served the growing population near Davis Square and the Old Powderhouse. The library construction was funded through a gift of $25,000 from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation and through city appropriations.

Miscellaneous newspaper clippings, West Branch Library
Form no. 65

Somerville

Address: 40 College Avenue

Historic Name: West Branch Library

Original: " Present: "

Ownership: □ Private individual  Private organization

Public: City of Somerville

Original owner: "

Description:

Date: 1909

Source: plans

Style: Roman Revival

Architect: McLean and Wright, Boston

Exterior wall fabric: smooth-faced granite

Outbuildings:

Major alterations (with dates):

Moved: Date:

Approx. acreage: less than one acre

Setting:

Recorded by: Carole Zellie

Organization: landscape Research

Date: 12/80

(Staple additional sheets here)
ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE (describe important architectural features and evaluate in terms of other buildings within community)

The West Branch Library is one of Somerville's best conserved examples of the Beaux Arts period. The fine entrance portico is composed of a triangular pediment carried by Ionic columns and broad pilasters. A modillioned cornice is carried around the building, and into the full raking cornice. Urns and acroteria finish the pediment. Similar examples of the various expressions of the Beaux Arts in Somerville have been altered.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (explain the role owners played in local or state history and how the building relates to the development of the community)

The West Somerville Branch library was opened in 1909, during the administration of Samuel Walter Foss, noted poet and author of the "House By the Side of the Road". The West Somerville branch originated in a store in Davis Square, and served the growing population near Davis Square and the Old Powderhouse. The library construction was funded through a gift of $25,000 from the Andrew Carneige foundation and through Town appropriation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

Miscellaneous newspaper clippings, West Branch Library
FORM B - BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
Office of the Secretary, State House, Boston

In Area no. 65


5. Lot size:
   - One acre or less X
   - Over one acre

   Approximate frontage 45'
   Approximate distance of building from street 20'

6. Recorded by Harriet White
   Organization MAPC
   Date 8/16/78
7. Original owner (if known) __________________________
   City of Somerville

Original use __________________________

Public library

Subsequent uses (if any) and dates __________________________

8. Themes (check as many as applicable)

Aboriginal _________ Conservation _________ Recreation _________
Agricultural _________ Education _________ Religion _________
Architectural _________ Exploration/ _________ Science/ _________
   settlement _________ invention _________
The Arts _________ Industry _________ Social/ _________
Commerce _________ Military _________ humanitarian _________
Communication _________ Political _________ Transportation _________
Community development _________

9. Historical significance (include explanation of themes checked above)

10. Bibliography and/or references (such as local histories, deeds, assessor's records, early maps, etc.)
Indicate each item on inventory form which is being continued below.

Other features: