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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: Thursday, April 8, 2021 at 11:57 AM
LEXINGTON

Address 12 Summit Road

Ornate Name Dudley Murphy House

Present residence

Original residence and studio

DESCRIPTION:

Year 1919

Source plans

Style Florentine Villa

Architect Harold W. Hathaway

Exterior wall fabric stucco

Outbuildings

Major alterations (with dates) 

Moved Date

Approx. acreage 2.11 acres

Setting At the crest of Mt. Independence; set back from residential street with houses of mixed twentieth century date.

Recorded by Anne Grady

Organization Lexington Historical Commission

Date March, 1984

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

This property is perhaps the finest example of early twentieth century landscape architecture in Lexington. The almost-three-acre site with extensive views to the east occupies the crest of Mt. Independence and incorporates the location of the nineteenth century observation tower. Retaining walls, many of which are curved, are used extensively to provide a level portion on the rear (view) side of the house and to landscape the high points to the east and west. The street side of the property has been fashioned into a formal Italian sunken garden.

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

The house was built in 1919 by Herman Dudley Murphy, an American impressionist painter. Murphy had lived and worked in Italy. According to tradition he asked architect, Harold Hathaway, to recreate the Italian Villa where he had lived in Florence for himself and his second wife.

The property incorporates the site of the observatory on Mt. Independence, and part of the original carriage road to the summit borders the eastern edge of the property. About 1834-1835, Eli Robbins, successful East Lexington fur processor and owner of the site, erected a three-story observatory on Mt. Independence, laid out drives to and walks around the summit, and connected the two driveways to the summit by a walk an eighth of a mile long. This walk was built of two solid stone walls, filled in with gravel, the side toward the summit had a trellis the whole distance covered with Isabella grapevines (Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society, II, p. 179). This was the first instance in Lexington of an owner opening his private property for public use. (The other prominent example is the B.F. Hayes estate, opened to the public in the late nineteenth century.) The observatory was a popular site, well used by citizens and strangers. Views in all directions were extensive and ships could be seen in Boston Harbor. The observatory was the site of a three day fair in 1839 which raised money for the erection of the Follen Church. Meals were served on the lower level during the fair, and the Brigade Band played on the second floor.

According to Dorothy Foster, there was a stand pipe on the site in the late nineteenth century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES (name of publication, author, date and publisher)


Newspaper clipping, source unidentified.


Personal communication from Dorothy Foster.

Personal communication from Mrs. K. Corcoran.
Indicate each item on inventory form which is being continued below.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The substantial U-shaped house was designed to be reminiscent of a Florentine villa. The large artist's studio to the left and the kitchen wing to the right form a three-sided entrance courtyard which includes an arcade of typical Italian design. The carved capitals, roundels and columns were probably originally covered with a pink/red glaze, perhaps to simulate marble. A subsequent owner added reproductions of the Parthenon frieze to the wall behind the arcade. A small fountain on the rear wall is finished with decorative ceramic tiles.

The rest of the house reflects a Craftsman/Prairie feeling compatible with its construction date. Inside are simple finishes of Cypress wood and rough plaster. There are a few small-scale Arts and Crafts style carvings around the doors.
In a town blessed with richly preserved history, 12 Summit Road has an unusual double importance. Both the Florentine mansion and the very land it was built on are significant parts of Lexington's story. The house was an utterly unique vision of the renowned American Impressionist painter who commissioned its building for a romantically sited home for himself and his new bride, also an artist. The land is what historians describe as the first town wide open conservation land.

First the site itself. Eli Robbins was a second generation Lexingtonian. His father, Stephen Robbins was the child of Scottish immigrants and was born in Lexington in 1758 and grew up to be a significant force in what was then a key industry for Lexington, the fur trade. “A man of fine features …(wearing)… a long straight-bodied coat, ruffled shirt, knee breeches, and a low crowned broad-brimmed hat, with his hair in a queue, and he carried a long staff…” Stephen’s charity to the less fortunate was well established, distributing free fuel to the needy from his rich peat fields and frequent dispersals of prized staples such as sugar and salt pork from his own larder. He was a civic minded man as well, donating the land upon which Follen Church stands.

Eli, who was born in Lexington in 1786 and raised in this atmosphere of kindness and social responsibility, continued his father’s tradition of largesse. Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to him as, "a man of genuine public spirit and profuse liberality." Concerned that there wasn’t a place for discussion and debate for important social issues of the day, he turned over the second floor of his property, the “Stone Building”, for this use. Before Follen Church was built, both Follen and Emerson preached here. He understood that to create community it was critical to have a space for open discourse.

Eli, his wife and daughters became leading abolitionists in town where many prominent families had previously owned slaves. Among them: Rev. John Hancock, Captain William Reed, Benjamin Muzzey, Francis Bowman, Esq., Lt. Robert Harrington, Matthew Bridge, William Munroe, Deacon Samuel Stone, Daniel Tidd, Deacon Joseph Estabrook, Ebenezer Fisk (sic), Samuel Lock (sic).
Eli also understood, well ahead of his time, that public outdoor space was a key component of community health. As Bradford Smith said, he “put his heart into all new enterprises for the benefit of the [village].”

12 Summit Road was the site of a spectacular three story observatory that Eli Robbins erected in 1835. Described in the 2009 Town of Lexington Open Space Plan as “perhaps the earliest effort to create an ‘open space’ after the Common was purchased”, the observatory was built in three stories around a towering flagstaff flying the American flag. He built two drives, one the existing road Bridle Path, then called Mountain Road, and a gravel walkway, an eighth of a mile long, surrounded by stone walls, covered with a trellis of Isabella grapevines. This was so that townsfolk could easily reach it from its perch on Follen Hill (then called Mt. Independence, some historians conjecturing in honor of the visit from the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824). The observatory quickly became a key component in social cohesiveness for the growing East Village Community. The observatory had amazing views in all directions, including directly into Boston Harbor. Julia Robbins, Eli’s daughter, noted in her diary that she watched the reflection of the moon in the harbor’s water. It was a frequent townsfolk destination on Sundays and holidays, most especially the annual Fourth of July extravaganza. It was not unusual on any fine weekend day to see a line of horses and carriages winding their way up to the summit. A large tent accommodated Fourth of July festivities and contemporary resident, Albert Bryant, recalls dancing spanning three consecutive nights. A fundraiser for the completion of Follen Church in August of 1839 had The Brigade Band gaily playing on the second level of the observatory.

The spectacular flagpole was almost certainly the cause of the marvelous structure’s demise as lightening struck and burned the observatory. The insurance company refused to reinsure and by then Robbin's personal finances had taken a disastrous turn in The Financial Panic of 1837, making rebuilding impossible. Nevertheless, he left behind a community brought together and enriched through his contribution to it.

The beautiful home at 12 Summit, was built in 1919. Hermann Dudley Murphy, an American Impressionist painter who had studied and lived abroad, commissioned the home to be designed by Harold Hathaway for Murphy and his wife, watercolorist Nelly Littlehale Umbstaetter. While vacationing in Italy, the couple fell in love with a home in Florence.
Murphy chose to adhere closely to true Florentine style, including the exquisite gardens designed by Frederick Law Olmstead Jr., the outlines of which still exist today. Nelly Littlehale Murphy was an avid gardener and both artists delighted in creating still life paintings with their garden flowers.

The grounds are described in The Lexington Historical Commission’s Cultural Resource Survey as “perhaps the finest example of early twentieth century landscape architecture in Lexington.”

They selected the premier landscape architect of their day, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., who augmented his landscaping with architectural elements by famed Norwegian sculptor Johan Selmer-Larsen. The site was designed to delight in its immediate surroundings and long views.

The National Park Service site describes Olmsted thusly: “Training in landscape architecture for Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. began in his youth. With the Olmsted office in the family home, diverse projects were near at hand, and his father ensured that he had productive experiences that would serve him well as a landscape architect, the career his father intended for him. Even before his 1894 Harvard graduation, "Rick" traveled to the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago and to the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina and was engaged in design and construction. With the onset of his father’s illness in 1895, Rick became more active in the firm assuming the role of partner in 1897. With John Charles, he helped to establish the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899 and served as its president for two terms. He also helped develop the country’s first degree program for landscape architecture at Harvard University. Following his father’s design philosophy, he had an abiding concern that cities be comprehensively planned to provide for healthy living and working conditions and scenic recreational opportunities. His national reputation was established with his early work for the McMillan Commission in Washington, DC to return the nation's capital to its intended beauty. He continued this urban planning work with reports on numerous cities across the country, including Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; New Haven, Connecticut; and Boulder, Colorado. He was a passionate advocate for the preservation of natural areas throughout the country and wrote the key language of the 1916 Organic Act that established the National Park Service. In 1928 he helped establish the first state park system in California. Toward the end
of his life, Rick continued in the forefront of the conservation movement as an active member of the Sierra Club and the California Save-The-Redwoods-League. A grove in Redwoods National Park now bears his name. He would say it was his father who instilled in him the idea that it was his mission "to protect and perpetuate whatever of beauty and inspirational value [is] inherent in that landscape."

The unique property was the site of many garden parties and distinguished guests were entertained on the premises, including Ulysses S. Grant. At the site of the observatory are remnants of stone walls and shaped paving stones. A painting of John Enser's, still another artist resident of 12 Summit, appears to depict the delightful view from the back of the home. It hangs today in Cary Library and is titled "Lexington Hills." Another known painting, a gouache of Murphy's, was auctioned to a private collection and appears to show the home's arcade.

Architect Hathaway may have been selected to execute the artist's vision for the home itself due to his expertise in building with stucco exteriors (another example of Hathaway's work can be found in The Fred C. Garmon House in Belmont MA.)

The house has several Florentine grace notes. Its lovely arcade features carved capitals, roundels and columns and a sunny corner loggia provides al fresco seating, conveniently located next to the underground wine cellar.

As, previous owner Nilma Handa explained in a 2007 Boston Magazine feature article about the house, the rooms were designed for use according to how the sun moves around the home.

The first, and for many years the only house in Lexington to have the official designation of "mansion," it contained many exceptional features including an artist studio, interior basketball court, Venetian swimming pool, and cypress wood Arts & Craft style detailing.

The property and house at 12 Summit Road have a unique and irreplaceable position in Lexington's history thanks to the vision of two of its owners, Eli Robbins and Hermann Dudley Murphy.
A.H. Ritchie, engraver

Eli Robbins b. 1786-1881
Quarter plate daguerreotype of Eli Robbins home and only known photo of the observatory in East Lexington

Lexington Historical Archives

Close-up of Observatory in above daguerreotype
Abolitionist Petitions signed by Eli Robbins and his wife and children

Harvard University Collection Department Widner Library Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions
Below is a snippet of a map of Lexington from 1830, by John Hales. This is a hand-drawn map, showing Mt. Independence, and what appears to be the outline of a structure at the summit.

~Amy Widmark Cary Memorial Library
Nelly Littlehale Murphy  (Douglas Volk, American Painter)

Hermann Dudley Murphy  (Self Portrait)
Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

Johan Selmer-Larsen
Correspondence between chief draftsman W.R. Phillips and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. concerning 12 Summit Rd.

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