

The Atwood House – Part II

A few weeks ago, the Advocate was good enough to print my guest column on the rather appalling situation of the ever-growing new CVS store and its overshadowed neighbor, the ever more neglected looking Atwood House. The Atwood House, readers will recall, was cited by the Arlington Redevelopment Board, which issued the permit for the CVBS store, as an important aspect of the site and of that section of Massachusetts Avenue.

As the result of my column, I was contacted by an interested reader, John F. Atwood, the grandson of the namesake of the house, and with his help I am able to fill in some of the background, showing how this house is significant not only architecturally, but historically.

According to the Arlington Historical Commission's records, the house was built in 1897 and originally was waterfront property, the backyard overlooking the now-vanished Cutter Mill Pond. According to tradition, the interior main staircase was executed by "Mr. Bilafer the woodworker."

Dr. Charles Fenner Atwood, a graduate of Harvard College (1896) and Harvard Medical School (1900), married Adah C. Gorton, like him, a Rhode Island native. Following initial medical practice in Hyde Park, Dr. Atwood moved to Arlington in 1904 upon accepting the position of town physician, which was followed by nine years as the doctor for the Arlington public schools. In 1911, the Atwoods purchased the house at 821 Massachusetts Avenue, where he established – as was customary in those days – both his office and his residence. Dr. Atwood was one of the original admitting physicians when Symmes Arlington Hospital opened in 1912, and he served a term as chief of the medical staff. He was a member of the Arlington Board of Health for a combined period of 25 years, with notable service during the Great Influenza pandemic of 1918.

Adah Gorton Atwood was active in many local clubs and organizations. After women received the right to vote, she was among the early female members of Arlington's Representative Town Meeting.

Dr. Atwood was in medical practice for nearly a half century. He died in 1954 at the age of eighty. Mrs. Atwood, hoping that the family home/office would continue as a medical facility, sold the property to Dr. William F. McCarty, Jr. (son of the legendary Arlington High School track coach William "Doc"

McCarty). Arlington native Dr. Michael Foley also had his medical office there for a number of years.

John Atwood retains the apartment of his late mother Leila MacAllister Atwood, and after a career as an attorney in federal government service, frequently returns to Arlington, and feels strongly about the importance of preserving and restoring the home. Houses like this, he feels, contribute to the community's sense of place and present an attractive appearance for the Town.

It's evident that the Atwood House is an architectural ornament to the Avenue and provides a fine visual transition element between the First Baptist Church and the new CVS building. But we know that it is also an historic site pertaining to a respected community leader of the first half of the 20th century. When I left the last of the ARB hearings on the CVS project, it was with the understanding, based on what was said by the proponents and the Board that the Atwood House – converted and added to for affordable housing by the Housing Corporation of Arlington – would be an integral and essential element of the project.

Why then does it appear to linger in an increasingly forlorn state as the massive CVS building nears completion? It is time, indeed past time, for the ARB and the developer to step up to the plate and fulfill the promises made.