

CT Trust Resource ID: 2617

HISTORIC RESOURCE INVENTORY – BUILDING AND STRUCTURES

State Historic Preservation Office, DECD, One Constitution Plaza, 2nd Floor, Hartford, CT 06103

*Note: Please attach any additional or expanded information on a separate sheet.

Inventory form modified for the Creative Places - Arts & Letters Project

GENERAL INFORMATION

Building Name (Common): Champlin Store

Other Name(s) (Historic): Champlin Store / Jensen, Leo V. Home & Studio/ Jensen, Leo V., Home & studio

Street Address or Location: 141 Main Street, Essex

Town/City: Essex

Village: Ivoryton

County: Middlesex

Designation(s): SRHD, NRHD

Owner(s): JENSEN, LEO V & DALIA I

Public/Private: Private

Latitude: 41.3460 Longitude: -72.4460

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Present Use: Domestic: single dwelling

Historic Use: Commerce/trade: retail store

Accessibility to public: No Exterior visible from public road? Yes

Interior accessible? If yes, explain: NA

Style of building: Vernacular Victorian Date of Construction: 1897-98

Material(s) (Indicate use or location when appropriate) Wood Shingle, Brick, Fieldstone, Aluminum Siding

Structural Systems(s): Wood Frame, Load bearing masonry

Roof(Type): Gable (Material): Asphalt Shingle

Number of Stories: 2 1/2 Approximate Dimensions: 30' x 35' plus 14' x 22' wing

Structural Condition: Excellent

Exterior Condition: Excellent

Locational Integrity: On original site Moved, When: NA

Alterations?: Yes If yes, explain: Conversion to residential and studio use

Related outbuildings or landscape features: Garden

Surrounding Environment: Residential, Residential, Residential

Interrelationship of building and surroundings: This property is on the north side of Main Street in the Ivoryton Historic District. To the west, Main Street leads to the upper complex of the historic Comstock, Cheney, and Co. ivory importing and manufacturing business, and to the east is the village center of Ivoryton, a section of the Town of Essex. The south side of the street is now a narrow strip of open space land along the bank of the Falls River, with a concrete sidewalk and ornamental trees. The house at 141 Main Street is sited at the street line, with its porch steps terminating at the edge of the asphalt roadway. The site slopes uphill toward the north and has a rear garden area accessed from the upper level of the building. Adjacent properties to the west and east have deep up-sloping front yards and buildings set far back from the road.

Other notable features of building or site: The building is a 2 1/2-story gable-roofed block, 30' x 35' in size, with its ridge-line oriented north-south and its gable façade facing the street. The façade includes a store-front configuration at grade with two large windows in the façade plane, a recessed entry door flanked by two canted windows. A concrete porch has recessed steps down to grade. An upper-level roofed porch is above the entry and the upper floor has four-bays, three two-over-two double hungs windows and a door off-center to the west. There are two similar windows in the attic. Siding is wood shingles at the grade level façade and aluminum horizontal siding on the remainder.

A two-story gable-roofed wing, 14' x 22', extends perpendicular to the east side of the main block. This has a deck along the south side with steps leading to grade a half level up from the street. A paved parking area is in the angle of the building at the southeast corner. At the west side some concrete piers and retaining walls suggest a former addition to the west. Brick foundation walls are visible at the rear of the west side. The roof is asphalt shingles.

Architect: Unknown Builder/Maker: Unknown

Historical or Architectural importance:

The Ivoryton Historic District is significant under Criteria A, B, and C at the state and local levels as a well-preserved example of a nineteenth-century company town built by Comstock, Cheney, & Co., an ivory import and manufacturing business established in the 1860s by Ivoryton native Samuel Merritt Comstock and partner George A. Cheney. Its resources illustrate important contributions to the development of the

ivory industry in the United States as well as the socioeconomic phenomenon of the 'company town' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the local level, the district represents Connecticut River Valley industry in the late nineteenth century as well as the brief period of increased worker immigration from Sweden, Germany, Italy, and Poland to Connecticut up until the start of World War I.

The Champlin Store at 141 Main Street was built in 1897-8 and functioned as a retail business during the early twentieth century period of Ivoryton's greatest prosperity as a factory town. It is a contributing resource in the Ivoryton Historic District for the period before 1938. It gains added significance for the mid-twentieth century, as the home of artist Leo V. Jensen.

Leo Vernon Jensen was born in 1926 in Montevideo, Minnesota, near his mother's family, the middle of three brothers. His father Albert, a cabinet-maker before the 1930s, became a circus promoter during the Depression years. Leo performed as a trick rider and apprenticed to the artist/handyman who painted the banners, scenery, and mended the wagons. Leo attended high school near Minneapolis and traveled with a rodeo during the summers, visiting art museums wherever he went. He studied at the Walker Art Center, and after successfully entering a show judged by Alexander Calder, he moved to New York in 1948. He worked as a store window decorator and this led him to New Haven where he roomed with students at the Yale School of Drama. His work featured 'a dazzling panoply of sculptures in wire, copper sheets, plastic, and wood putty — the latter medium recalling his repair of carved circus wagon figures' (Falk). Ten years later, Pop Art would become a recognized field of art. Jensen's work would always draw inspiration from the Midway, the rodeo, and the vocabulary of primitive and outside art.

During the 1950s Jensen managed a building in New Haven as a cooperative for artists; later he joined a colony of artists in Westbrook. Among these was William Kent (see nomination for Durham). Leo Jensen met his wife, Dalia Tamanauskas during this period, and they married in 1958. He learned welding and ceramics and added these to his compositions. In the 1960s he designed modern light fixtures and achieved some success in gallery shows in New York during the height of popularity of Pop Art. At this time, with the colony in Westbrook dispersed, the couple moved to Ivoryton and settled in their home on Main Street, continuing to work and exhibit. In the 1990s, Jensen created the gigantic frog sculptures for the Willimantic Frog Bridge, which have become a well-known attraction.

Sources:

Esser, Phillip and Michell Trevino. 2013. Ivoryton National Register Historic District Nomination No. 13000895. National Park Service.
Falk, Peter Hastings. Jensen, Leo: Pop Master from the Midway. Rediscovered Masters web site. Accessed 12/31/2015 at <http://rediscoveredmasters.com/Artists/ShowArtist/37>. Daley, Bill. Jensen, Leo, biography. Pop International Galleries web site. Accessed 12/31/2015 at <http://www.popinternational.com/leo-jensens-biography.html>. Town of Essex Assessor's Records: <http://gis.vgsi.com/essexct/Parcel.aspx?Pid=1564> Map/Lot: 58/017; Parcel ID: 1564. 0.3 acre. Sale date 1966.

Photographer: Charlotte Hitchcock **Date:** 5/06/2015

View: Southeast view

Organization: Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Address: 940 Whitney Avenue, Hamden CT 06517-4002

Form completed by: Charlotte Hitchcock **Printed On:** January 5, 2016

Threats: None known

Subsequent field evaluations:



Ivoryton, 141 Main St. - Champlin Store / Jensen House

FOR OFFICE USE:

Town # _____ **Site#** _____ **UTM** _____

District ☐ S ☐ NR **If NR, specify:** ☐ Actual ☐ Potential