

CONNECTICUT STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating individual properties and districts to the Connecticut State Register of Historic Places (C.G.S. Chapter 184b, Sec. 10-409(2). See instructions in *How to Complete the Connecticut State Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets. Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Wilder, Thornton, House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 50 Deepwood Drive

city or town Hamden vicinity

county New Haven zip code 06517 not for publication

3. State Agency Certification

I hereby certify that this nomination meets does not meet the documentation standards and criteria for registering properties in the Connecticut Register of Historic Places. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

State Historic Preservation Officer

Date _____

4. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-state
- public-federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Contributing

1

buildings
sites
structures
objects

Property Owner

name Caroline Merrill & Howard Bloch

address 50 Deepwood Drive

city Hamden state code CT

zip code 06517 phone _____

1

Total

Wilder House

Hamden Municipality

5. Historic Preservation Council

Approval date

Comments _____

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural/Archaeological Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

EARLY 20TH CENTURY

CENTURY REVIVALS: Colonial Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls WOOD: Clapboard

roof ASPHALT

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

8. Statement of Significance**Applicable Connecticut Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for State Register listing.)

1 That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to our history and lives of persons significant in our past; or

2 That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or

3 That have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Levels of Significance (local, state)

State: Criterion 1

Local: Criterion 2

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

LITERATURE

ARCHITECTURE

Significant Dates

1929: house constructed (Yellig)

1929-1975: permanent residence of Thornton Wilder

Significant Person

Wilder, Thornton

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion 3 is marked)

Architect/Builder

Washburn, Alice

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

Wilder House

Name of Property

Hamden

Municipality

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.13

Municipal Map, Block and Lot Number and UTM Coordinate (If possible)

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	Map	Block	Lot
1	<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

3	<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

See continuation sheet

Latitude & Longitude – 41.338568, -72.914903

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

The boundaries of the nominated property are the legal limits of Block 2128, Lot 068 of the Town of Hamden's assessment records (Parcel ID 1692).

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

The boundaries encompass the full extent of the intact historic resource on this property associated with writer Thornton Wilder.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	<u>Kristen Nietering</u>		
organization	<u>Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation</u>	date	<u>May, 2015</u>
street & number	<u>940 Whitney Avenue</u>	telephone	<u>(203) 562-6312</u>
city or town	<u>Hamden</u>	state	<u>CT</u>
		zip code	<u>06517</u>

CONNECTICUT STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM – Continuation Form

Wilder House

Name of Property

Hamden

Municipality

Narrative Description

The Wilder property is an early twentieth century residential resource associated with one influential individual who was engaged in writing in Connecticut. This nomination was prepared as part of the Creative Places – Arts and Letters Project.

The house sits on approximately one acre of land on the west side of Deepwood Drive, close to the road, and a horseshoe driveway is just east of the house. The parcel is on a ridge and the slope of a large hill. The surrounding land is forested. It overlooks the city of New Haven and Long Island Sound to the south. A chicken coop sits to the west of the house, and the south portion of the property is a steeply sloped hill. Deepwood Drive is a curvy road that extends to the west off Whitney Avenue, which runs north-south through New Haven and Hamden. The properties along Deepwood Drive typically consist of late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century style houses including Colonial Revival houses along with Modern houses.

Hamden is a town located in New Haven County, directly to the north of the City of New Haven. Deepwood Drive is less than a mile to the north of the border of New Haven, off Whitney Avenue which runs through the east side of Hamden. Less than half a mile to the south of the property is the Eli Whitney Museum and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation office, both of which are included in the Eli Whitney Gun Factory individually listed National Register of Historic Places site. Approximately five miles to the north of the property is Sleeping Giant State Park, and Brooksvale Recreational Park is approximately seven miles to the northwest of the property.

Data Table (C – contributing, NC – non-contributing):

House	1929	C
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House:

This house is a 2-story with basement built into the side of a hill. It measures approximately 65' x 22,' and is Colonial Revival in style with a side-gable roof. It consists of a rectangular main block and a garage wing attached on an angle to the east side of the house. The ridge-line is perpendicular to Deepwood Drive, and the façade faces north. The house is clad in wide clapboards with asphalt shingles on the roof, and the foundation is made of brick. The grade rises along the north and west sides of the house, allowing for the house to essentially be built into the hill.

The main entry is on the façade of the house, set within a shed-roof vestibule with numerous windows. Two eight-pane casement windows and two diamond pane casement windows are just to the east. To the west of the entry is a large exterior brick chimney. Along the second-story of the house are eight-pane casement windows. The brick foundation is visible along this side of the house. A stone stairway and retaining wall run along the north elevation of the house at an incline as the grade rises.

The west elevation of the house has a series of windows on the first story (which are close to the ground due to the raised grade). Just above, centered on this side are two pairs of casement windows. A wooden staircase leads up to a landing, makes a 90 degree turn and leads to another landing where there is a pair of doors (on the second story). There are no other features on this side.

Along the south elevation of the house the grade declines. A brick retaining wall extends to the east along this side, and a concrete patio extends from the house, towards the south, between the house and retaining wall. The second story near the

west corner of the south elevation of the house projects over the first story, creating a covered patio on this end. To the east, on the first story, are three sets of double doors spaced evenly along this side. Just above are two sets of paired casement windows, and windows are found on the projecting second story. A wooden staircase leads to grade level near the east corner, as the grade declines towards the southeast, revealing a lower storage level on the east side of the house.

Two pairs of wood double doors with four pane windows set within each leaf are on the lower level of the east side of the house. Just above, on the first story, are two pairs of casement windows. Above these, in the gable-peak, is a large pair of casement windows where Wilder's study used to be.

The interior of the house is reached by the door on the north façade. It leads into a small vestibule and another door leads into the house. To the west of the entrance is a living room, and straight ahead (to the south) is the dining room. To the east is a staircase that leads to the second story of the house. Built-in bookshelves are found in the living room and a large fireplace is set within the north wall. A decorative wooden surround and wooden mantel adorn the fireplace. A built-in corner shelving unit is found in the dining room, and French doors in both the living room and dining room lead to the patio on the south exterior of the house.

The wood paneled staircase leads to the second story of the house where bedrooms and what was once Thornton Wilder's study are located. The study is located in the east gable-end of the house; the large window overlooks the driveway and Deepwood Drive. Another feature of the room is the narrow, arched closet door next to the doorway to the study. Hardwood floors and decorative door surrounds and window surrounds are found throughout the home. It is important to note that the furnishings of Wilder's study were removed and relocated to 2901 Dixwell Avenue, the Miller Public Library in Hamden, where they are currently on display near the entrance.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Criterion 1

This property derives its primary significance for its associations with writer Thornton Wilder. Wilder, a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner wrote his last novel, *Theophilus North* in his study on this property. He is well known for his play, *Our Town*. "Its success as a play matched that of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as a novel and, exactly a decade after *The Bridge* had won Thornton his first Pulitzer prize, *Our Town* won him his second: he became the first author to have received the award for two different categories of writing" (Wilder 1985, xv). He had the house on Deepwood Drive built as a place his family could live and gather during holidays. The house gains significance due to its association with its designer and builder, Alice Washburn.

Wilder's Association with the Property:

Thornton Wilder owned the property on Deepwood Drive in Hamden for 46 years until his death. He wrote his last novel, *Theophilus North*, in his study on this property where he also often worked on his other novels and writings. The house was built in 1929 for Wilder, and he often referred to it as "the house the bridge built" since it was built with his earnings from *The Bridge at San Luis Rey* (Bryer 1992, 88). He had the house built as a place for his parents to settle, and the family to gather during holidays and throughout the years (Niven 2012, 364). It was not until his later years that Wilder settled down in his home, as he often traveled throughout his life. His sister, Isabel, lived at 50 Deepwood Drive with him. After Wilder's death in 1975, Isabel continued to live in the house for a short time before it was sold to the next occupants.

Since it was built, the house has only had three owners. In 1976, Robert and Eleanor Adair purchased the property from Thornton Wilder's Estate. They continued to live there for more than 30 years until in 2010 it was sold to the current owners.

Significance of Thornton Wilder:

Thornton Wilder was well known as an author and playwright. He was a three time Pulitzer Prize winner among many other awards and honors. One of his best known works is *Our Town*, "a play still produced all over the world [as of 1985]" (Wilder 1985, xv). Thornton Wilder was born in 1897 in Wisconsin to Amos Parker Wilder and Isabella Niven Wilder. He had an older brother, three younger sisters, and a twin brother who was stillborn at birth. At the age of nine, he moved with his family to Hong Kong where his father was appointed as the United States Consul General. In 1915 he began studies at

Oberlin College in Ohio until 1917 when he transferred to Yale University in New Haven. He received his degree from Yale in 1920.

During World War I, Wilder served for a year in the Coast Artillery and afterwards spent a post-graduate year at the American Academy in Rome. In 1921 he returned to the United States and began teaching French at The Lawrenceville School, a boy's preparatory school in New Jersey. During this time he earned a post-graduate degree at Princeton University while also working on his first novel, *The Cabala*, which was published in 1926. In 1927, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was published and sold 300,000 copies in its first year. This was an astounding number during this era (Whitman 1975).

With the money he earned from *The Bridge at San Luis Rey*, he was able to support his family financially and purchase the Hamden property (Niven 2012, 329). During the 1930s, Wilder taught at the University of Chicago before resigning in 1936. In 1938, Wilder's play, *Our Town*, debuted in New Jersey. It then went on to Broadway where it was a huge success. *Our Town* portrayed life in Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, a fictitious town that represented all small town life (Whitman 1975). The play *Our Town* was progressive for its time due to its lack of background props and the use of a narrator to engage the audience. As noted by Ashley Gallagher on the Thornton Wilder Society website, "Our Town's emphasis on the universality of daily life, conscious audience engagement, and minimalist theatrical style are a few of the signature techniques which have qualified Wilder's work both at home and abroad as the 'most representative and significant product of the modern American theater'" (Thornton Wilder Society 2015).

Also during 1938, Wilder's play, *The Merchant of Yonkers*, debuted on Broadway, but was not well received. He re-worked his play and in 1954 it debuted in the United Kingdom under the title, *The Matchmaker*. It was later adapted into *Hello, Dolly!* which became a success, and is still produced to this day (In fact, *Hello, Dolly!* was recently produced at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut in 2013).

Opening in 1942, *The Skin of Our Teeth* premiered in New Haven before going to Broadway. "Although many famously exited the theater after the first act, the play earned Wilder his third Pulitzer" (PBS 2015). During World War II, Wilder served in the Army as a lieutenant colonel in the air intelligence. After the war, he wrote *The Ides of March* which was published in 1948. Although the idea for this novel came to Wilder when he was a student at the American Academy in Rome, it developed after his wartime experiences with politics, propaganda, and military leaders (Niven 2012, 581). Harvard invited Wilder to occupy the Charles Eliot Norton Chair for the academic year 1950-1951. This was a lecture series established in 1925 that included at least six lectures throughout the academic year. At the age of 75, Wilder wrote his last novel, *Theophilus North* which was based on his own experiences as a teacher. Much of the writing he did for this novel was done in the studio in Hamden at his home on Deepwood Drive (Whitman 1975). It was written in part as a reflection of Wilder's life. As mentioned by Penelope Niven in her biography of Wilder, "As Wilder explained to journalists, his stillborn twin brother would have been named Theophilus, the traditional name of second sons in earlier generations of the Wilder family, and he called Theophilus his 'other self.' 'North' was an anagram for 'Thornton'" (Niven 2012, 682). The novel was set in Newport, Rhode Island, and it was compiled over many years. Wilder wrote the novel within a year in Hamden, Connecticut. He began writing *Theophilus North* in April of 1972 and completed it in April of 1973. Wilder died in Hamden at the age of 78 in 1975.

Criterion 2

The site gains significance due to its association with the locally prominent designer and builder, Alice Washburn. According to conflicting reports, the house was either designed by Alice Washburn or William Douglas from the locally prominent Douglas Orr Architectural Firm. In the writings, *Alice F. Washburn, Architect* by Martha Yellig and *Thornton Wilder: A Life* by Penelope Niven the house is documented as being designed by Alice Washburn. However, Martha Becker, in hand written notes found in the Miller Library in the Historical Society's room, mention that William Douglas was the designer of the house. These notes, though, are at times unclear and hard to decipher. For this reason, it is assumed the house was designed by Alice Washburn.

Alice Washburn (1870-1958) was a building designer and a pioneer in this generally all male field during the 1920s. At the age of 49, she began designing and building houses, and is responsible for approximately 100 Colonial Revival style dwellings built around New Haven, Hamden, and Cheshire between 1919 and 1933 (Hanle 2011). She had a team that helped her which included her daughters and their husbands, a master carpenter, masons, a plumber, an electrician, and subcontractors.

Washburn was a perfectionist and often times would spend her own money, when clients were unable to afford the expense, on features she felt needed to be incorporated in the house to complete her vision (Yellig 1990, 11). For this reason she often

gave clients an affordable price, and ended up going into bankruptcy during the Great Depression. As noted by Yellig, “Her refusal to compromise on quality and her lack of business training were probably factors in her inability to survive the construction industry’s hard times during the Depression years” (Yellig 1990, 12). After she went bankrupt, her and her sister rented apartments for the rest of their lives, living on the little inheritances they had left and from the financial support offered to them by Washburn’s daughters.

In *The Colonial Revival House*, Richard Guy Wilson explains, “Neither a formal style nor a movement, Colonial Revival embodies an attitude that looks to the American past for inspiration and selects forms, motifs, and symbols for replication and reuse” (Wilson 2004, 6). The Colonial Revival style was a popular style throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and into the twenty-first centuries. The peak of its popularity is credited to between 1880 and 1955 and was influenced by the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial which sparked in the American public an interest in its colonial architectural heritage (McAlester 2003, 326). This style draws from many early American architectural styles and buildings including: Georgian, Cape Cod, Dutch Colonial, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Spanish Mission, Spanish Colonial, and French Colonial, among others. It is a broad style and not only reminiscent of early New England dwellings.

Early on, the Colonial Revival style houses were not historically correct; decorative features of the style were pieced together and not historically accurate (McAlester 2003, 326). After the turn of the twentieth century, the style shifted towards greater accuracy with correct proportions and details. Built in 1929, Wilder’s house is more reminiscent of the post medieval style of early New England with its low ceilings, leaded glass windows, and pointed arched doorways. As noted in the Historic Resources Inventory form,

Architecturally, this house is significant as a good example of the Colonial Revival style, one of the early 20th century’s most popular fashions in domestic architecture. This house, like several others in the Mill Rock area, attempts to suggest the picturesque, somewhat medieval quality of early American vernacular building. The obliquely angled wing, steep gable, and leaded sash all make reference to the dwellings of 17th-century New England (Clouette and Roth 1985).

Bibliography

Photographs, field notes, and site visit by Kristen Nietering - 9/4/2014.

Photographs by Sven Martson - 2010

Interview with Caroline Merrill - 9/4/2014, 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden.

Interview with Christopher Wigren, Deputy Director of Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation – 4/30/2015

Map Resources:

Hamden Tax Assessor's Records accessed 9/30/2014 - <http://gis.vgsi.com/hamdenct/Search.aspx>

Parcel ID: 2128/ 068

Hamden GIS Viewer accessed 9/30/2014 at <http://www.hamdengis.com/>

Aerial views from:

<http://maps.google.com/> and <http://www.bing.com/maps> - accessed 9/30/2014.

USGS Historical Maps at <http://historical.mytopo.com/> accessed 9/30/2014.

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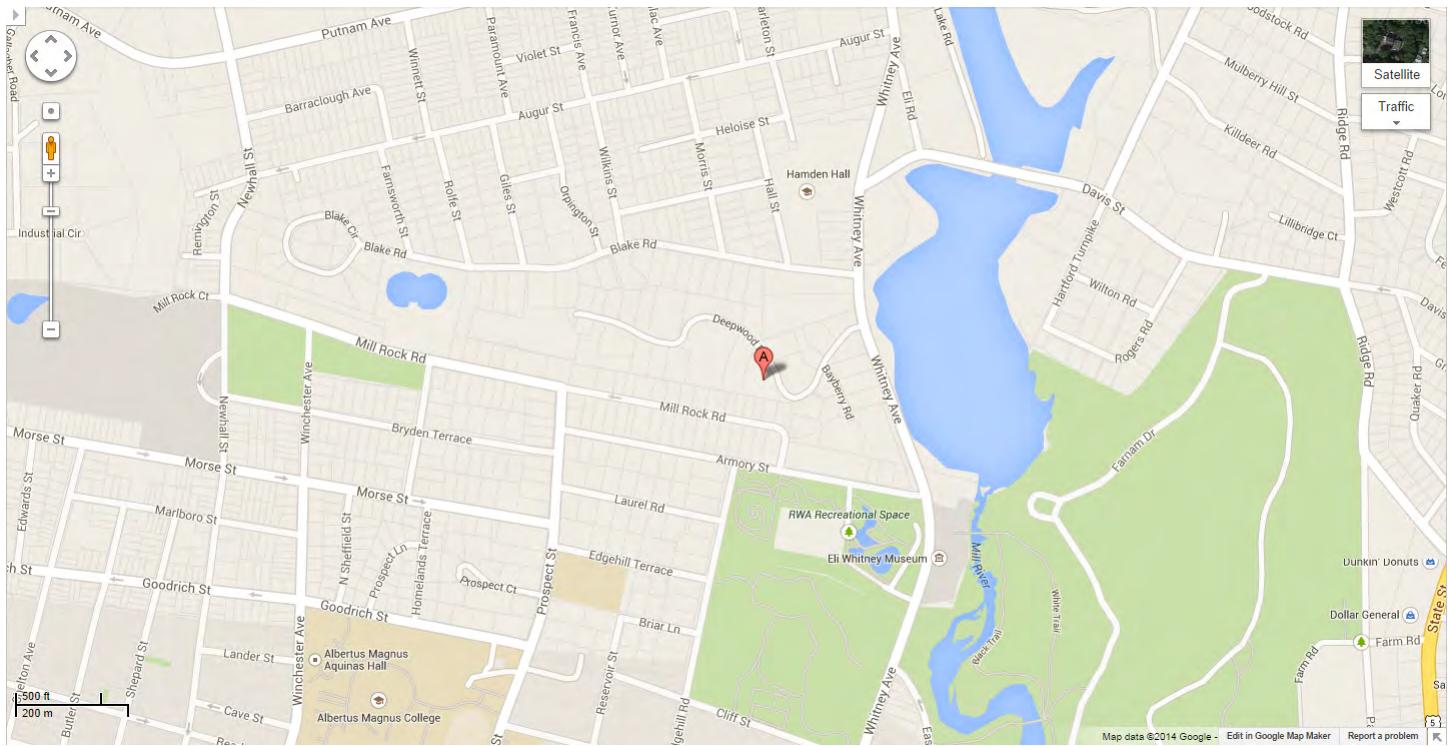
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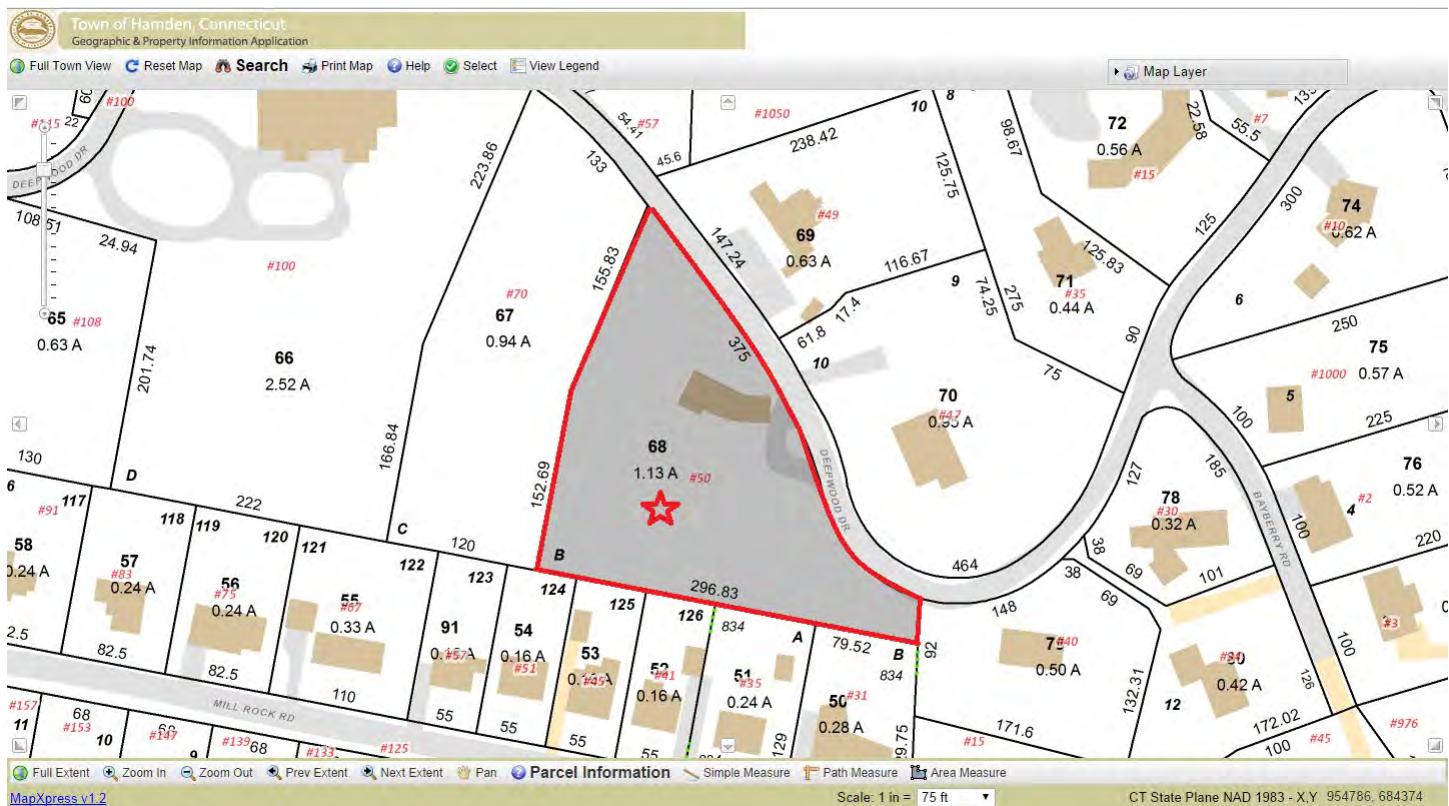
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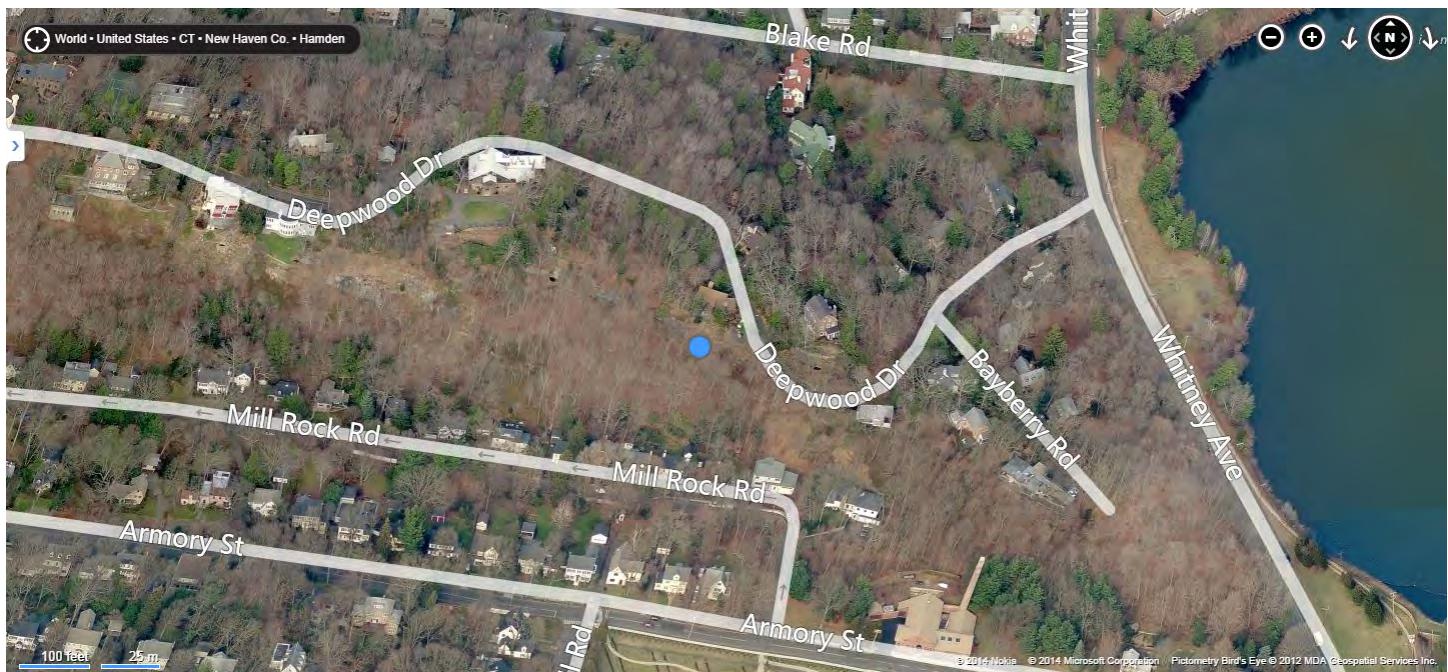
Yellig, Martha Finder. 1990. *Alice F. Washburn, Architect*. Hamden: Tiger Lilly Press.



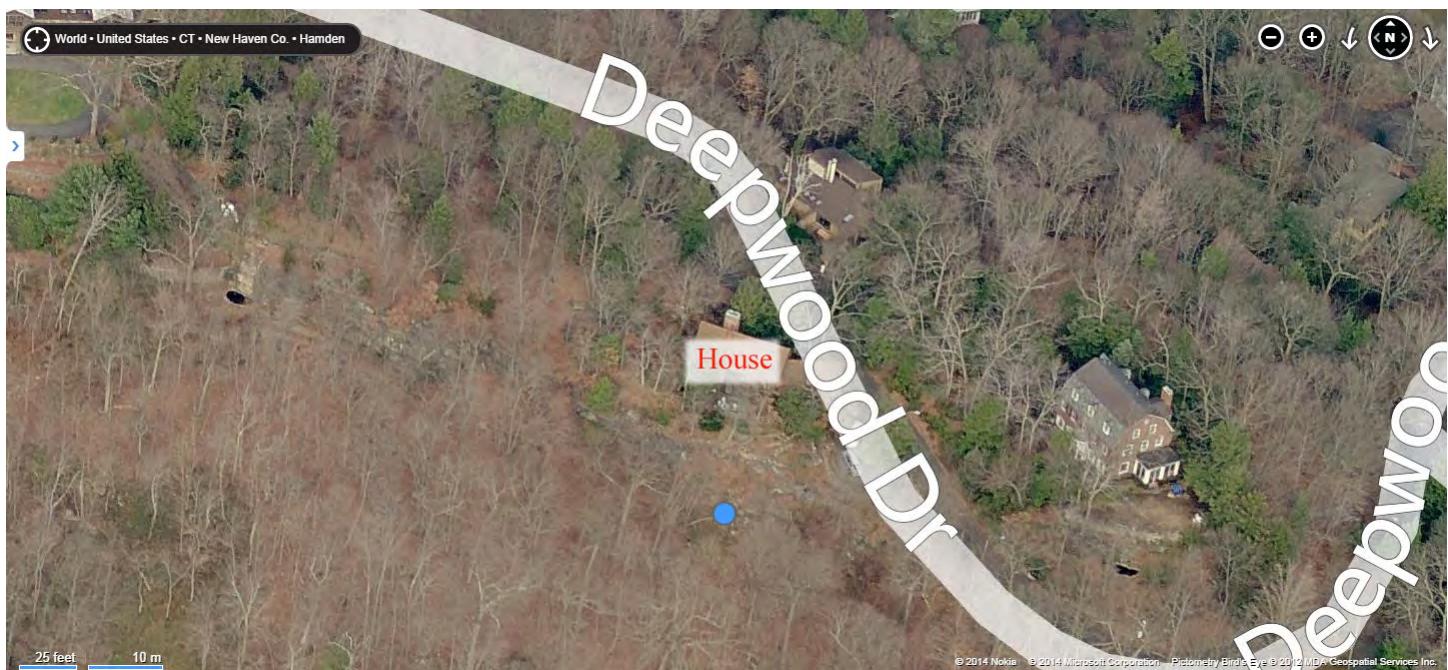
1. Location map of 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden, CT – from <http://maps.google.com> – accessed 9/30/2014.



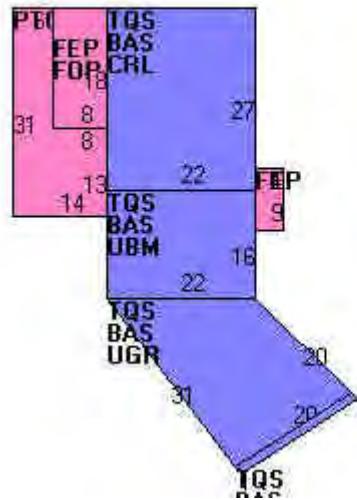
2. Parcel map of 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden, CT – from <http://www.hamdengis.com/> - accessed 9/30/2014.



3. South aerial “bird’s eye” view of 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden, CT – from <http://www.bing.com/maps> – accessed 9/30/2014.



4. Site map of 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden, CT – from <http://www.bing.com/maps> – accessed 9/30/2014.



5. Floor plan of 50 Deepwood Drive, Hamden, CT – from <http://gis.vgsi.com/hamdenct/Parcel.aspx?pid=1692> – accessed 5/5/2015.



6. Northwest context view of the house from the street. Camera facing southeast.



7. West context view of the house. Camera facing east.



8. Northeast context view of the property. Camera facing southwest.



9. East side and north façade of the house. Camera facing southwest. Credit Sven Martson, Photographer (2010).



10. Close-up of main entrance on north façade. Camera facing southeast.



11. West side of the house. Camera facing east.



12. West side and a portion of the south side of the house. Camera facing northeast.



13. West side and south side of the house. Camera facing northeast.



14. South side of the house. Camera facing northeast.



15. East end of the south side of the house. Camera facing northwest.



16. East side of the house. Camera facing west. Credit Sven Martson, Photographer (2010).



17. View of the re-created study in the Miller Public Library located in Hamden. The furniture was removed from the home sometime after Wilder's death so the study could be re-created and displayed in a public location.