

Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism
Historic Preservation and Museum Division/State Historic Preservation Office

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 Wright, Richardson Little and Vassos, John and Ruth House
 other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 100 Comstock Hill Avenue
 city or town Norwalk vicinity
 county Fairfield zip code 06850 not for publication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)

Category of Property
 (Check only one box)

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

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

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

Contributing	
<u>2</u>	buildings
_____	sites
_____	structures
_____	objects
<u>2</u>	Total

Property Owner
 name Mona Levy
 address 100 Comstock Hill Avenue
 city Norwalk state code CT
 zip code 06850 phone _____

Wright/Vassos House

Name of Property

Norwalk

Municipality

5. Historic Preservation Council

Approval date _____

Comments _____

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural/Archaeological Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Craftsman/Colonial
Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE: Fieldstone

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

Wright/Vassos House

Name of Property

Norwalk

Municipality

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)

ART

LITERATURE

ARCHITECTURE

Significant Dates

1925: house constructed (Deeds)

1935-1965: year-round occupancy of the property by John and Ruth Vassos

1965-1985: seasonal use of the property by John Vassos

Significant Person

Wright, Richardson Little

Vassos, John

Vassos, Ruth

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion 3 is marked)

Architect/Builder

Wright, Richardson Little

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

Wright/Vassos House

Name of Property

Norwalk

Municipality

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

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

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.29

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

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	<u>5</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>33</u>			
	Map	Block	Lot			
1	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

See continuation sheet

Latitude & Longitude – 41.144832, -73.449979

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 45, Lot 33, Map 5 of the Town of Norwalk’s assessment records (Parcel ID 17110).

Boundary Justification

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

The boundaries encompass the full extent of the intact historic resources on this property associated with artist John Vassos and writer Ruth Vassos.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kristen Nietering

organization Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation date April, 2015

street & number 940 Whitney Avenue telephone (203) 562-6312

city or town Hamden state CT zip code 06517

Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism
Historic Preservation and Museum Division/State Historic Preservation Office

CONNECTICUT STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM – Continuation Form

Wright/Vassos House

Name of Property

Norwalk

Municipality

Narrative Description

The Wright/Vassos property is an early twentieth century residential resource associated with three influential individuals who were engaged in art, design, and writing in Connecticut. This nomination was prepared as part of the Creative Places – Arts and Letters Project.

This property is located on the northeast side of Comstock Hill Avenue in Norwalk and includes a house constructed in 1925 and an early to mid-twentieth century garage on a 1.29-acre lot. The house is sited on the back (east end) of the lot and is buffered from the road by an apple orchard. A paved driveway extends east from the road along the south property boundary and terminates in a loop in front (west) of the house. Before turning into a loop, a section of the driveway splits and extends to the south elevation of the garage, and another extension of the driveway splits from the loop and terminates in front of the east elevation of the garage. The four-car garage is situated behind the orchard, just to the southwest of the house. A stonewall runs along the east border of the property. Dense vegetation around the edges of the property screen it from the road and surrounding houses. This property is located within a neighborhood of early to late-twentieth century single-family houses.

Norwalk is a town in Fairfield County, not far from the New York State border. The property is located in the Silvermine Guild area of Norwalk. The Silvermine Guild of Artists straddles Norwalk, New Canaan, and Wilton. The property at 100 Comstock Hill Avenue is approximately 500 feet southeast of the border of the Town of New Canaan. Approximately 2.5 miles to the southeast of this property is the center of Norwalk. The Silvermine Guild Center National Register Historic District is directly to the northeast of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, which is not included in the boundaries of the district.

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

House	1925	C
Garage	c. 1925	C

House:

The house is set back from the road, behind an apple orchard, and faces west. It is a one-story, wood-frame, side-gable house with some Colonial Revival and Craftsman features. The Colonial Revival features include the square porch columns, molding around the windows, and clapboards that end in corner molding (Wigren 2015). The Craftsman features include the door and fieldstone foundation. The house is sheathed in clapboard siding, has a fieldstone foundation, asphalt shingles on the roof, and a stone chimney. This single-family residence includes seven rooms and is approximately 3,300 square feet.

The sloping side-gable roof includes a shed-roof dormer that was expanded in the twenty-first century by the current owner. The front door is centered on the main façade, and is flanked by square pilasters and two one-over-one windows. The door is reached by a Dutch-style split staircase. Square columns support the south façade overhanging flared eaves of the roof and connect to the stone floor on the ground.

On the south elevation of the house is an addition that was added in the early 2000s. This side includes multiple windows and a two-story deck. Both the upper and lower decks have wooden railings, the lower deck also having square wooden columns. The lower deck is accessed from the ground level by a staircase.

The decks wrap around to the east elevation of the house, but do not extend the full width of this side. Five one-over-one windows are found on the east elevation. On the north elevation is another shed-roof dormer on the slope of the roof. Attached to the north side of the house is an addition that was added by John Vassos as a studio. A door to the studio is accessed by an exterior staircase located on this side of the house.

The main door opens into a hallway with an open staircase to the right (on the south side of the house). Leading off to the left (to the north corner of the house) is a sitting room/guest room. Also to the right of the door, past the staircase, is the doorway to the kitchen. The kitchen area was added by the Vassoses and was updated by the current owners. Straight back (to the east) from the main doorway, the hallway opens into the living room. To the right (on the south side) of the living room is a dining nook that was added by the Vassoses. To the left (on the north side) of the living room is a guest bedroom with a bathroom, and the studio.

The upper level includes a sitting area just to the left of the stairs (on the north side of the house), and to the right (on the south side) is a bathroom and a dressing area. In the east side of the house is the master bedroom.

Hardwood floors and Craftsman style woodwork are found throughout the house. Period furniture and decorative pieces adorn the interior. The kitchen was completely remodeled when the current owners purchased the property.

Garage:

The garage is a wood frame, one-story, L-shaped building. It has wood shingle siding and a concrete foundation. The hip-roof is clad in asphalt shingles. Overhead garage doors with windows are located on the south and east elevations. Based on its form and design, the garage appears to date to the early to mid-twentieth century.

Orchard:

An apple orchard is located on the north side of the driveway, which extends along the south side of the parcel. It consists of apple trees laid out in two rows from east to west. The apple orchard was extant when Richardson Wright purchased the property in 1924. Wright maintained the orchard until 1935 when the property was sold to the Vassoses who continued to maintain it.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Criterion 1

This property derives its primary significance for its associations with writer/editor Richardson Wright, artist and graphic designer John Vassos, and science-fiction writer Ruth Vassos. John and Ruth Vassos created nationally known works of writing and art at the property during their year-round occupancy of it from 1935 to 1965. This site is also located in the Silvermine Guild section of Norwalk, an art colony formed in the early twentieth-century. Both Ruth and John Vassos were actively involved in the Silvermine Guild.

Wright's and the Vassos' Association with Property:

On October 30, 1924, Richardson Wright purchased farmland property from Elizabeth Johnson, a widow from Illinois (Brophy). He then purchased land on December 3, 1924 from William Byron (Brophy). Deed research indicates these two purchases included "land without any buildings." In 1925, Richardson Wright erected the house for use as a guest cottage on his large estate. Originally, the cottage did not have a kitchen. Wright wanted his guests to dine in the main house with him which was located on Comstock Hill Road in New Canaan. For this reason, he deliberately did not include a kitchen when the house was built. In 1935, Wright sold the house with one acre of land to John and Ruth Vassos. By this time, the property was called "The Little Orchard" due to the apple orchard that was situated in front of the house.

The Vassoses made some changes to the house when they acquired it. They added a kitchen, a dining nook, and John also added a studio to the north side of the house. After John Vassos' death in 1985, the house passed on to his nephew, Paul Johnes. Johnes sold the property to Michael and Sheila Cockcroft in 1990. In 2003, the current owners, Mona and Lee Levey, purchased the property.

Significance of Richardson Little Wright:

Richardson Little Wright was born in Philadelphia in 1887 to George Shumaker Roberts Wright and Mary Ann Wilbraham. He was one of nine children, and his father was a pharmacist. In 1909, Richardson Wright married Mary Butler Vandegrift and they lived in Philadelphia with Mary's family. In 1913, Richardson and Mary divorced.

In 1914, Richardson Wright married Agnes Foster, an interior designer and later Editor of *Bride's* magazine. They lived in New York City, and at this time, Richardson became Editor of *House and Garden*. In 1924, the Wrights purchased property in New Canaan, Connecticut, in the Silvermine area. They often used this as a summer home.

In 1939, Agnes Foster died, and a year later Wright married Louise Hoadley. This marriage would last less than a year and end in divorce. In 1941, Wright married Gertrude Albion MacCormick who he would be married to for the remainder of his life. After 36 years of dedicating his life to *House and Garden*, Wright retired in 1950. Richardson Wright contributed greatly to *House and Garden*, increasing circulation from less than 10,000 when he began and raising it to over 400,000 when he retired. He was also responsible for keeping the magazine going during the hard Depression years in the early 1930s. In 1961, Wright died at the age of 75.

Significance of Ruth and John Vassos:

John Vassos was born in 1898 in Romania to Greek parents. His family moved to Constantinople (present day Istanbul) when he was a child. As a young teenager, John drew cartoons for his father's newspaper. By 1919, Vassos had immigrated to the United States, first moving to Boston, and eventually settling in New York City in the 1920s. While in Boston he attended Fenway Art School and in New York City he went to the Art Students League. During this time he was also working, while attending classes at night.

Ruth Carriere (sometimes written as Carrier) was born in 1894 in Albany, New York. During the 1920s, she was living in New York City, and was a well-known fashion writer and consultant for Sak's Fifth Avenue. Ruth and John met at a party in The Chelsea Hotel in New York City, and they married in 1924.

After they were married, Ruth and John lived in a penthouse on Riverside Avenue in New York City and first visited the Silvermine area in the early 1930s. As noted by Lee Levey, the current owner of the property,

John and Ruth first visited Silvermine in the early 1930s at the insistence of Dorothy Bayard. Ruth felt it would be beneficial to have a home in the country. They rented a house for several years on New Canaan Road in Wilton until they purchased "The Little Orchard" from their friend Richardson Wright. Over the years several additions and renovations were carried out, including a studio for John (Levey).

John became involved in the Silvermine Guild of Artists and periodically served as president from the 1930s until the 1950s. Vassos' long career included many varied areas of expertise such as industrial design, interior design, writing, and illustrating, among others. He began working with Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1932 and would remain associated with them for the next forty years, where he designed numerous radios and television sets. In 1939, John helped to design the RCA exhibit displaying television for the first time at the New York World's Fair, and he would go on to help design their exhibit in 1940 as well.

During the 1930s, John and Ruth collaborated on a series of short science-fiction stories. Ruth wrote the text while John did the illustrations. These stories "explored the themes of alienation, war and the homogenizing effect of mechanized technology, presented as nihilistic condemnations of world progress at the expense of humanity" (Carley pg. 18). Because of

this, according to tradition, Ruth is known as the first American female science-fiction writer. John also illustrated adaptations of Oscar Wilde's works, and stories he wrote himself.

In 1965, Ruth Vassos died and John purchased a small house in Florida to live in during the winters. John kept this property on Comstock Hill Avenue as his summer home, and remained active in Norwalk and the Silvermine Guild through the 1970s. In 1985, John died in his home at the age of 87.

This property is culturally significant as a place where John and Ruth Vassos produced their creative works of writing and art. The studio in the house was added by John Vassos, and continues to be used as a studio to this day. Although little known today, John Vassos was once a popular industrial designer, illustrator, writer, and decorator. As noted by Rachel Carley in the Creative Places Essay:

Vassos's career as artist, industrial and graphic designer, illustrator and architect was not only amazingly rich, but also evocative of his era. Vassos spent his early years in Boston assisting the renowned set designer Joseph Urban at the Ziegfeld Follies, before opening a design studio in New York in the 1920s, where he studied at the Art Students League. His output of commercial and theater art covered everything from print advertising to modernistic window displays for Macy's, as well as murals and curtains for movie palaces. (pg. 17)

Furthermore, according to tradition, Ruth was touted as the first American female science-fiction author through her stories she wrote and published with John. They moved to the Silvermine Guild area and were heavily involved with the colony. John served as president three times between 1930 and 1960, he also went on to become the president of the Norwalk Historical Society in the 1970s.

In the Connecticut story of modern 20th-century arts, New Canaan's Silvermine Guild is particularly noteworthy for its early multidisciplinary embrace of the arts and contemporary media including graphic and industrial design, commercial and book illustration, cartooning, dance, concert music and film (Carley pg. 16).

Criterion 2

The property is significant at the local level under Criterion 2 as an example of the proliferation of the domestic design preferences distributed through published home journals and architectural catalogs during the early twentieth century. Although the house has been altered many times since its construction in 1925, the features commonly found on Craftsman style houses remain. Some of these features include stone foundation and chimney, low-pitched gable roof, and eave overhangs. As noted by Kirsten Brophy,

Side gabled Craftsman houses are a subset of the true style and are found most commonly in the northeastern and Midwestern states. Other common features of the Craftsman style are wood clapboard siding, a stone foundation and chimney, Prairie style windows and doors, hammered copper hardware built-ins, a cobblestone fireplace and linear, geometric interior trim work: oak and other hardwoods (Brophy).

This house also incorporates Colonial Revival style features as well including the square columns and molding around the windows, door, and clapboards that end in molding. Both Craftsman and Colonial Revival styles were popular during the early twentieth century when this house was built. The house has remained on the same site since it was built, and the apple orchard has been situated in front of the house for just as long.

Bibliography

Photographs, field notes, and site visit by Kristen Nietering – 6/20/2014

Interview with Lee Levey, AIA – 6/20/2014, 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT

Interview with Christopher Wigren, Deputy Director of Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation – 4/27/2015

Phone interview with Lee Levey, AIA – 4/27/2015

Map resources:

Norwalk Tax Assessor's Records accessed 6/25/2014 at <http://gis.vgsi.com/NorwalkCT/Search.aspx>

Parcel ID: 5/ 45/ 33

Norwalk GIS Viewer accessed 6/25/2014 at <http://ags2.cdm.com/norwalkct/>

Aerial views from:

<http://maps.google.com/> and <http://www.bing.com/maps> - accessed 6/25/2014.

Historical aerial photography and maps accessed 6/25/2014 at UConn MAGIC:

http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/mash_up/1934.html

http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/historical_maps_connecticut_towns.html .

USGS Historical Maps at <http://historical.mytopo.com/> accessed 6/25/2014.

UTM coordinates accessed 6/25/2014: <http://itouchmap.com/latlong.html>

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Connecticut State Library online accessed 6/25/2014: [iconn.org](http://www.cslib.org) or

<http://www.cslib.org/iconnsitemap/staff/SiteIndex.aspx#directories>

Carley, Rachel; *Creative Places: Modern Arts and Letters in Connecticut*. Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation & State Historic Preservation Office, 2014.

Endres, Kathleen L. and Lueck, Therese L.; *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines*; Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, CT, 1995; accessed 4/30/2015 at <https://books.google.com/>

Levey, Lee; *John Vassos and the Cartoonists of Silvermine*, 2009. Can be accessed at <http://www.nashct.com/history/silvermines-history/john-vassos-and-the-cartoonists-of-silvermine>

McAlester, Virginia and Lee r; *A Field Guide to American Houses*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 2003.

Schwartz, Danielle; Modernism for the Masses: The Industrial Design of John Vassos; *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 1/2 (2006), pp. 4-23; accessed 4/28/2015

The New York Times (1851-2010) accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers on 6/25/2014

Mrs. Richardson Wright – May 11, 1939

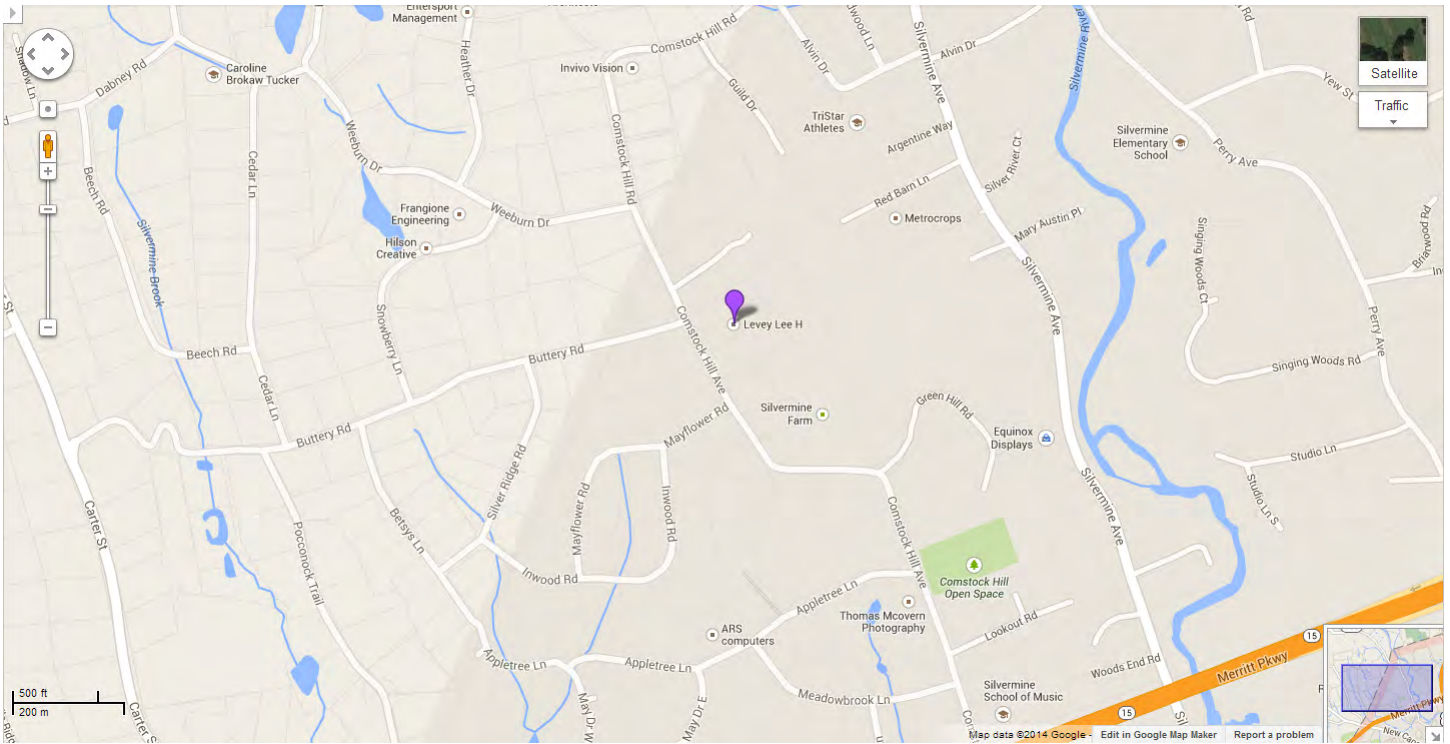
Richardson Wright Weds – August 29, 1941

Richardson L. Wright is Dead; Ex-Editor of House and Garden – August 7, 1961

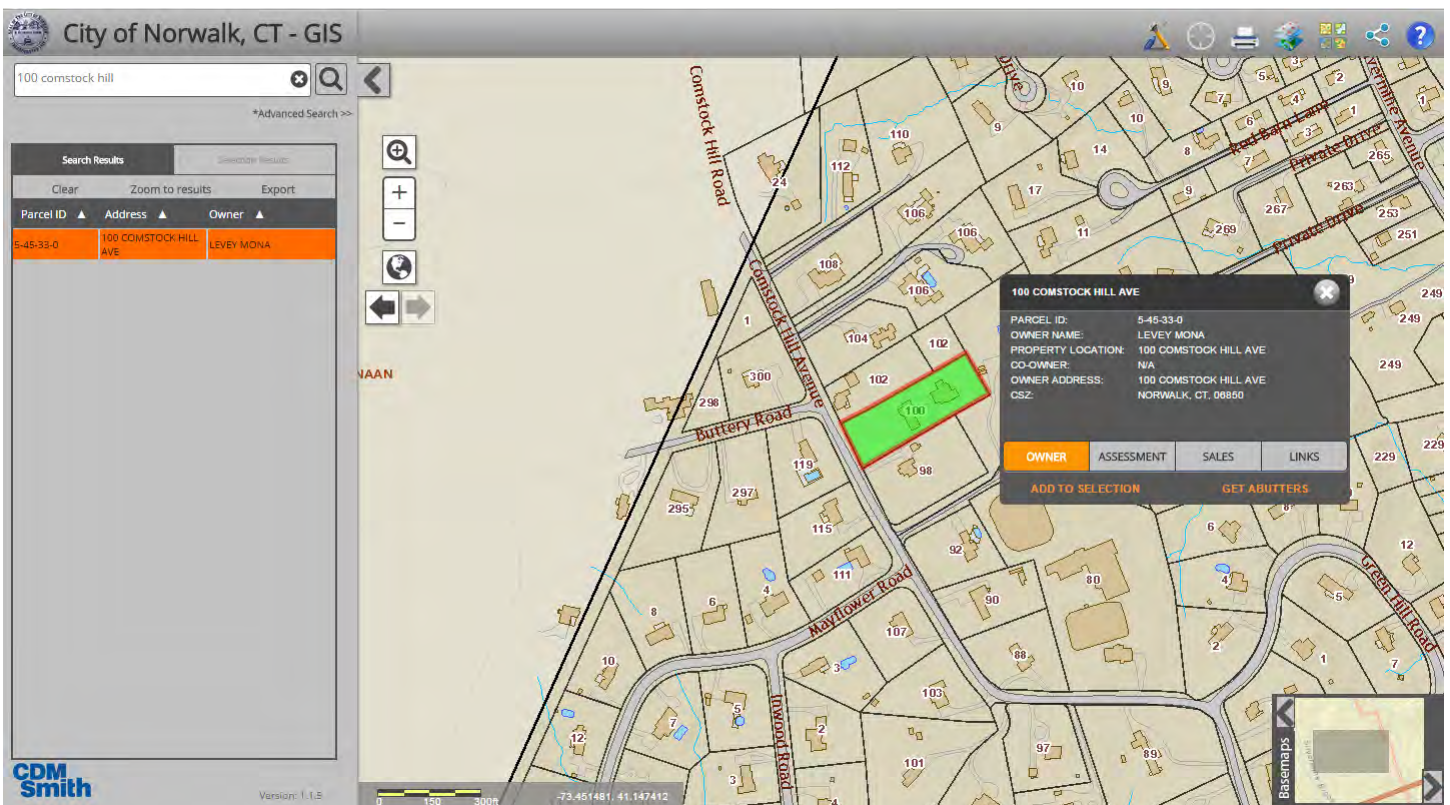
Ruth C. Vassos, Fashion Writer, 70 – February 21, 1965

John Vassos – December 10, 1985

U.S. Federal Census, accessed at <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/census/search/basic>



1. Location map of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT – from <http://maps.google.com> – accessed 6/25/2014.



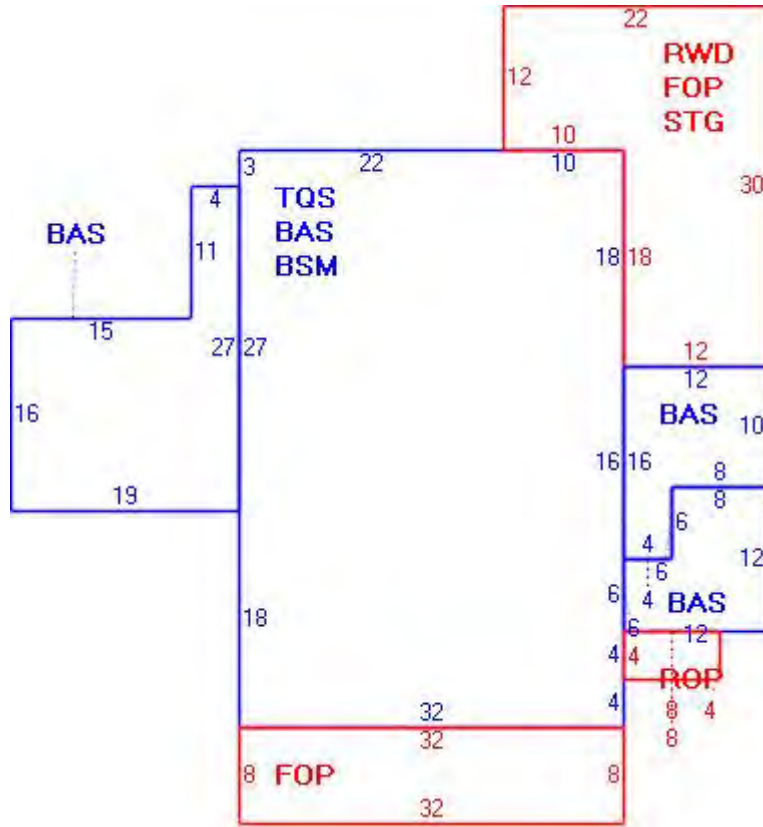
2. Parcel map of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT – from <http://host.cdmsmithgis.com/norwalk/> - accessed 4/30/2015.



3. South aerial “bird’s eye” view of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT – from <http://www.bing.com/maps> – accessed 6/30/2014.



4. Site map of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT – from <http://www.bing.com/maps> – accessed 6/25/2014.



5. Floor plan of 100 Comstock Hill Avenue, Norwalk, CT – from <http://gis.vgsi.com/NorwalkCT/Parcel.aspx?Pid=17110> – accessed 4/30/2015.



6. Northeast context view of the orchard in the distance, the garage (on the right), and the driveway in the foreground. Camera facing southwest.



7. Northeast context view of the house (on the left) and the garage (on the right in the distance). Camera facing southwest.



8. East view of the garage. Camera facing west.



9. West view of the main façade of the house. Camera facing east.



10. Close-up of main door on the main façade of the house. Camera facing east.



11. Southwest view of the house. Camera facing northeast.



12. South elevation and east elevation of the house. Camera facing northwest.



13. Northeast of the house. Camera facing southwest.



14. North view of the house. Camera facing south.



15. View of the studio John Vassos added to the house. Camera facing northeast.



16. Interior view of the living room. Camera facing east.



17. Interior view of the dining nook added by John and Ruth Vassos. Camera facing south.