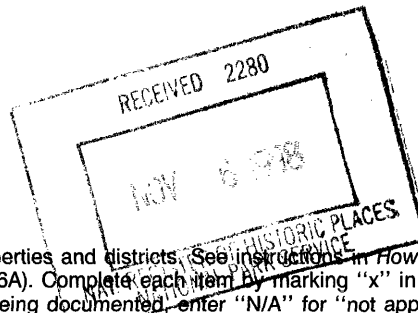


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form



1440

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). 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 (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Benedict House and Shop

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number 57 Rockwell Road  not for publication

city or town Ridgefield  vicinity

state Connecticut code CT county Fairfield code 001 zip code 06877

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

John W. Shannahan October 23, 1998  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
John W. Shannahan, Director, Connecticut Historical Commission

State of Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Edson H. Beall  
Signature of the Keeper

12/4/98  
Date of Action

Benedict House and Shop  
Name of Property

Fairfield, CT  
County and State

**5. 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 the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
3	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
3	0	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

COMMERCE/TRADE/cobbler shop

AGRICULTURE/barn/wellhouse

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

COLONIAL/Postmedieval English

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls weatherboard/shingle

\_\_\_\_\_

roof asphalt/wood shingle

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

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

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Continuation Sheet**

Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

Section number 7 Page 1

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The Benedict House and Shop are located just southeast of the center of the Town of Ridgefield. Situated on a steeply sloping lot at a curve on the north side of Rockwell Road, this c. 1740 Cape and its attached cobbler's shop face south (Photograph #s 1, 2, 3). Two contributing associated structures date from the nineteenth century: a wood-shingled gabled barn to the northwest, which was converted to a residence in the 1920s (Photograph #4), and a wellhouse directly behind the house, no longer in use. Since the property slopes up from the west and south with a 30 percent grade directly behind the house and barn, these structures are built into the side of the hill, and the shop has a full-height rubblestone foundation on its west and south elevations.

The Benedict House has a three-bay facade and an off-center rubblestone chimney stack, capped with brick above the ridge. A hipped-roof porch supported by square posts extends across the facade to the one-story, gable-roofed shop on the west side. The shop door to the lower level is located in its facade foundation. Historically, the facade clapboards were painted white; the rest of the walls were red.<sup>1</sup> The roof, presently asphalt-shingled, was once wood-shingled on the front slope and covered with tin at the rear. According to local sources, all the rubblestone masonry was drylaid, but it is likely that at least clay mortar was used for the chimney. Today the stonework is mortared, except for the base of the chimney.

The present house incorporates additions and alterations made by architect Cass Gilbert in the 1920s and the family of the present owner after 1931 (see exhibit A). The original dwelling was quite small (28' x 22'), with a two-bay facade. One-and one-half stories at the front and only one at the rear, with an extended rear roof, it had the appearance of a saltbox. As shown in a historic photograph from the late 1800s, the porch once wrapped around the east end of the house to a shed-roofed appendage, possibly a summer kitchen, at the rear of that elevation. After the shed was enlarged as a one-story bedroom wing in the late 1920s, and another bay added in the 1930s on that side to the rest of the main block, the porch was reduced to its present length (Photograph #5). The extended flat-roofed rear kitchen ell also dates from the 1920s. The cobbler's shop was built as a free-standing structure, but with its main floor on the same level as that of the house, there must have been a passageway between them, which was not enclosed until the 1930s.

These remodelings produced some obvious changes in the fenestration, but many original windows remain in place, such as two of the small six-pane sash above the facade porch and two nine-over-six sash below, one of which is part of the triple window on the west side. The door itself, composed of two layers of vertical boards with interior battens, is also original. Other early sash are found on the west end of the main block (Photograph #3), where there is a pair of six-over-six windows at the attic level, with a small fixed four-pane sash to the rear, the latter a characteristic feature of Capes of this period. Similar old sash configurations are found in the windows of the shop.

The simple interior plan of the Cape of c. 1740 has three first-floor rooms, each with its own fireplace, organized around a massive chimney stack. Original interior finishes include house partitions of bead-and-bevel wainscot and shell lime and hair plaster in both the house and shop. Because the plasterwork is thick and uneven, most of the rough-hewn girts and posts barely protrude into the rooms of these buildings.<sup>2</sup> The interior doors are all the board-and-batten type with wrought-iron hinges and latches.

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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

Section number 7 Page 2

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The main door of the house opens directly into the keeping room, or kitchen, with the hearth on the left. The fireplace, which is relatively small for a cooking hearth (42" x 42" x 15" deep), is constructed of stone blocks and has a plain board surround (Photograph #6). The wide board that covers its wooden lintel continues over two small doors on the left, which conceal a beehive oven and woodbox below.<sup>3</sup> There is now a corner closet to the left of the fireplace, but, as shown by the riser under the door, it once was the entrance to the stairwell or ladder to the attic. A cased beam and a post opposite the fireplace establish the original length of this room. Cupboard doors on the back partition wall flank the left side of the door to the northeast corner room, which is one step down from the kitchen. Since this room was once only seven feet wide, little more than a passageway, the cellar stairs on its west wall are not original, but were added when the room was enlarged to the rear in the 1920s. The earlier access to the cellar was from the outside through the stone hatchway to the left of the front door.

The two rooms on the other sides of the stack are now open to each other (Photograph #7). Although such an arrangement is not unheard of, in the original plan, the small borning room at the southwest corner was partitioned off. An outside door just inside this room leads to the shop. The rough-hewn post to the right of this door and the opposite chimney girt are the only really visible structural members in these rooms. The borning room fireplace opening is quite small (36" x 25" x 14") but the chamber fireplace is almost the same size as that of the keeping room (42" x 27' x 18"). Except for bolection molding around the one in the chamber, these fireplaces have similar plain surrounds. Their narrow mantel boards may be later additions.

A steep staircase runs alongside the front of the stack, with the entrance just to the right of the borning room fireplace. This side of the stack is stepped back with a shelf to accommodate a narrow upstairs passage (21" wide), in which floor boards are laid directly on, or fitted around the stonework (Photograph #8). The slanted sides of the stack are stuccoed in the attic, and in the small west chamber, protrude into the room. A partition covers the stack wall in the east chamber (Photograph #9). It is likely that rafters were once exposed in both these rooms, as they are in the passageway, but now the entire rafter-and-collar-beam framing system is concealed by a plastered ceiling (c. 1920). There is a crawl space under the eaves behind the rear kneewalls.

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

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

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

- ARCHITECTURE
- SOCIAL HISTORY
- INDUSTRY

**Period of Significance**

c. 1740 - c. 1940

**Significant Dates**

N/A

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

unknown

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

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

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

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

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

\_\_\_\_\_



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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

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**Statement of Significance**

The Benedict House and Shop, two of the oldest surviving colonial buildings in Ridgefield, have considerable local significance. In addition to their historical association with the Benedict family and the later early industrial history of Ridgefield, these buildings are a well-preserved illustration of the lifeways of a colonial artisan. The survival of the house and shop in this century is largely due to generally sympathetic restoration and remodeling, first by architect Cass Gilbert (1858-1934), and then the Wohlforth family. That Gilbert was able to modernize the buildings with minimal loss of historic architectural integrity is evident, and the Wohlforths' care and maintenance of the property for more than 60 years have contributed to its state of preservation.

**Historical Background and Significance**

Ridgefield, which lies on the border with New York State, is the northernmost town in Fairfield County. It was settled by people from Norwalk, who purchased the "plantation" in 1708 from the Ramapoos, one of the many tribal divisions among Native Americans who inhabited the western hills of Connecticut. The first settlement was laid out along a central ridgeline, one of three that ran north-south through the 20,000-acre tract. Homelots were established along the present Main Street and land set aside for a green and cemetery in 1708. By the following year, each of the 26 proprietors had received an additional five acres at the rear of their homelots. Several divisions of the outlying land were completed by 1718. Although the General Assembly had designated Ridgefield as an "entire township" in 1709, it was not incorporated until 1731.

The Benedict (aka Bennedick) family, headed by James Benedict, Sr., were original proprietor settlers. The house and shop have been attributed to James' son Ensign James Benedict (1685-1762), who owned the land and was a shoemaker, or cordwainer. Family members were involved in other trades that also were necessary in a subsistence economy. In 1714 a James Benedict (probably the father) was one of several men who had the town's permission to erect a sawmill. By 1739 another Benedict was part owner of that mill or one nearby. It had a 600-foot stone dam (still extant) and was run by the family into the nineteenth century.

Ensign James, who was a deacon of the Congregational Church, also served the town as a fence viewer and as a representative to the General Assembly. An officer in the local militia or trainband, he held the rank of lieutenant in 1732.<sup>4</sup> The property passed down through several generations of shoemakers, including John Benedict (1726-1814), the son of Ensign James. It left the family in 1848, when it was sold by John Harvey Benedict. The recollections of a descendant suggest that other Benedicts may have rented the property and/or used the shop even after that date.<sup>5</sup> A cobbler's bench and tools used by the family are still found in the house.

By the nineteenth century, improved highways and rail transportation brought Ridgefield's tradesmen in touch with a wider market. No longer independent producers of custom-made shoes, as they had been since colonial times, the Benedicts became part of an evolving rural industrial economy, in which shoemaking was a major cottage industry, employing 40 men as early as 1820. There were many organizational parallels with the rural hatmaking trade, also practiced in Ridgefield. Shoemaking remained decentralized, with most shoemakers in Ridgefield still operating out of their own

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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

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shops. Essentially, however, they had become skilled laborers in a trade network that relied on New York City wholesalers to supply the pre-cut uppers and soles for finishing. Shoes shipped back to the dealers were sold in Europe (as indicated in the local history), but the Deep South was probably the major market. The plantation economy there depended on a wide range of Northern goods, including clothing and farm implements, as well as luxury items, such as carriages, also produced in Ridgefield for the Southern market. Shoemaking on this scale continued until trade was disrupted by the Civil War. After the war, shoemakers in Ridgefield and other upland communities were forced out of the market as shoemaking, like most rural industry, was consolidated in factories on the coast.

By then Ridgefield was well on its way to becoming a fashionable summer resort and artists' colony. As was the case with many Connecticut hilltowns, the railroad was the catalyst, bringing summer visitors to its inns and new residents, who built lavish seasonal and year-round homes. The Danbury-Norwalk line already passed through the southern part of town; a spur line connected the center in 1870. Main Street was transformed as new stylish houses and public buildings were constructed and old homes restored. Among the major architects who participated was J. Cleveland Cady, who designed the new Congregational Church in the Richardsonian Romanesque style in the 1880s. Cass Gilbert, who came to Ridgefield in 1907, restored the Keeler Tavern on Main Street as his permanent residence.

Gilbert's national reputation as an architect was based on major works, such as the Woolworth Building and the U.S. Customs House in New York City; less publicized was his active involvement in residential Colonial Revival restoration in Connecticut. It is known that he restored at least one house in Roxbury, and the Benedict property was just one of four that he purchased and restored in Ridgefield, in addition to the Keeler Tavern. His other local architectural contribution was the design of an Italianate fountain, which still stands at the intersection of Main Street and West Lane.

Although he continued to practice his profession, Gilbert's prestige in the American art world also made him a valued member of the local artistic community, which included prominent artists and writers, such as Frederic Remington and Eugene O'Neill. In addition to serving on national arts councils during the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, Gilbert was a member of the American Arts Academy, one of the founders of the Arts League in New York, and president of the National Academy of Design.

In 1931 Gilbert sold the restored house and shop, along with converted barn, complete with furnishings, to the Wohlforths as a year-round residence. They came here from New York City, where Robert was in the publishing business and his wife Mildred was a columnist for the Hearst papers. The Wohlforths were among the first wave of suburbanites who lived in Ridgefield and worked in New York. Except during World War II, when Robert worked for the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., he commuted to the city by train.

**Architectural Significance**

The Benedict House and Shop are exceptional and rare examples of vernacular colonial architecture, enhanced by the integrity of their unusual terraced setting. Few of these modest cottages or shops have survived at all; often houses of this type evolved



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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

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into full five-bay Capes or even more elegant two-story Colonials, which obscured their original form and plan. Although not of the same period and converted to residential use, the barn has retained its original form and orientation and serves as a reminder that nineteenth-century owners were still subsistence farmers as well as tradesmen.

Considerable ingenuity was needed to develop this difficult site and still orient the house for solar gain in winter. A southern orientation required digging into the side of the hill for the foundation and an extended rear roof to buffer the north wind. Typically, the house cellar is quite low, with only part of the foundation below the original grade. Excavated material was discarded around the building to build up the grade for a higher foundation and to create a relatively level site, which is buttressed by a high stone wall on the west.

Having retained much of its original plan, form, and materials, the essential historic core of the dwelling can still illuminate the status and life style of the builder. That he was relatively poor is clearly conveyed by the functional simplicity of the design, in which utility takes precedence over symmetry. There are no formal, little-used rooms, such as the parlor or entry porch found in larger colonials, and finish detail is quite plain. Living conditions were cramped. The rooms are very small; every bit of living space is utilized and arranged to take maximum advantage of wood-burning fireplaces. Even the chimney stack is exposed in the attic in an attempt to provide some warmth upstairs, but how much radiant heat was given off there is questionable. Given their thickness, it is evident that walls were plastered in both the house and shop for insulation value rather than esthetic reasons. It is interesting that apparently none of the later Benedicts or other nineteenth-century owners could afford to enlarge the house, with the possible exception of the shed-roofed summer kitchen. Indoor plumbing and perhaps even electricity were not installed until the property was purchased by Cass Gilbert in the 1920s.

Gilbert's remodeling of the Benedict House was a typical expression of his restoration style. As he did with his other Ridgefield properties, Gilbert added more floor space while preserving the basic integrity of the original structure. He skillfully held back wings, or confined additions to less visible rear elevations, as was done here. Even the plumbing and heating system, including the existing bathrooms, were installed outside the original footprint. Clearly, Gilbert's remodeling was designed to make the house more livable. The northwest corner room was enlarged enough to become a dining room. An entirely new modern kitchen was extended from the rear. Another bedroom with bath was added well back on the east elevation. The additions made by the Wohlforths do affect the exterior integrity of that elevation to some degree. However, their work had no real impact on mid-eighteenth-century plan or the historic appearance of the interior.

Even though he retained the simple characteristic gabled forms, Gilbert's conversion of the barn and shop for residential use did affect their internal historic integrity. In the barn, except for a few cased beams, nothing remains of its functional plan or historic fabric. There was far less impact on the interior of the shop, where original finishes were preserved, but it too no longer recalls its earlier historic function.

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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

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End Notes:

1. For this and the following, see Silvio A. Bedini, *Ridgefield in Review*, 1958, p. 261 (fig. 144), and pp. 333, 334.

2. Rather curiously, during the Gilbert remodeling, an intermediate post in the west wall and the one at the original northeast corner were cut off, leaving only stubs exposed below the girt. The rest of these posts may remain behind the plaster patches.

3. Although these buildings have been dated as early as 1730, and some sources have 1720 for the shop, the location of the beehive oven, which seems to have its own flue, is indicative of a later construction date. There is no compelling evidence for an earlier shop in the present location. In fact, the height of its foundation is clear evidence that the shop was built after the house. Otherwise it would not have been built in this location or with the same sill height as the house.

4. Although none of the Benedicts are recorded for army service in the Revolution, the property was involved in the Battle of Ridgefield in 1777. After the attack on Danbury, British troops returned through Ridgefield, which was defended by local men and troops under the command of General Benedict Arnold. One skirmish took place on the hill behind the house, where it is said several British soldiers are buried.

5. Alice Benedict (b. c. 1846), who lived in the house as a child, was living across the road when the Wohlforths bought the property. She presented them with the cobbler's bench on which her great-grandfather, grandfather, and uncles made shoes. See typescript by Mildred Wohlforth in possession of the family.

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Continuation Sheet**

Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

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**9. Major Bibliographic References**

Bedini, Silvio A. *Ridgefield in Review*. Published by the Ridgefield 250th Anniversary Committee, Inc., 1958.

Historical and Architectural Survey of Ridgefield. Connecticut Historical Commission, 1979.

Rockwell, George L. *The History of Ridgefield Connecticut*. Harrison, New York: Harbor Hill Books, 1979 (reprint of 1929 edition).

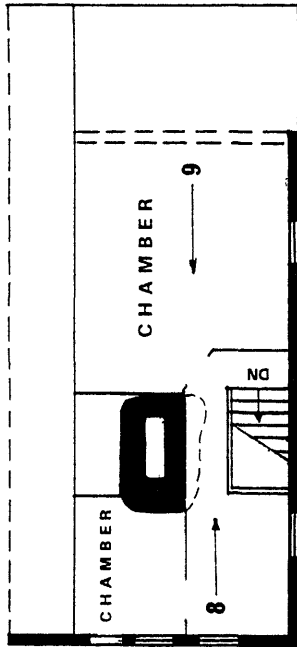
**10. Geographical Data**

Verbal Boundary Description:

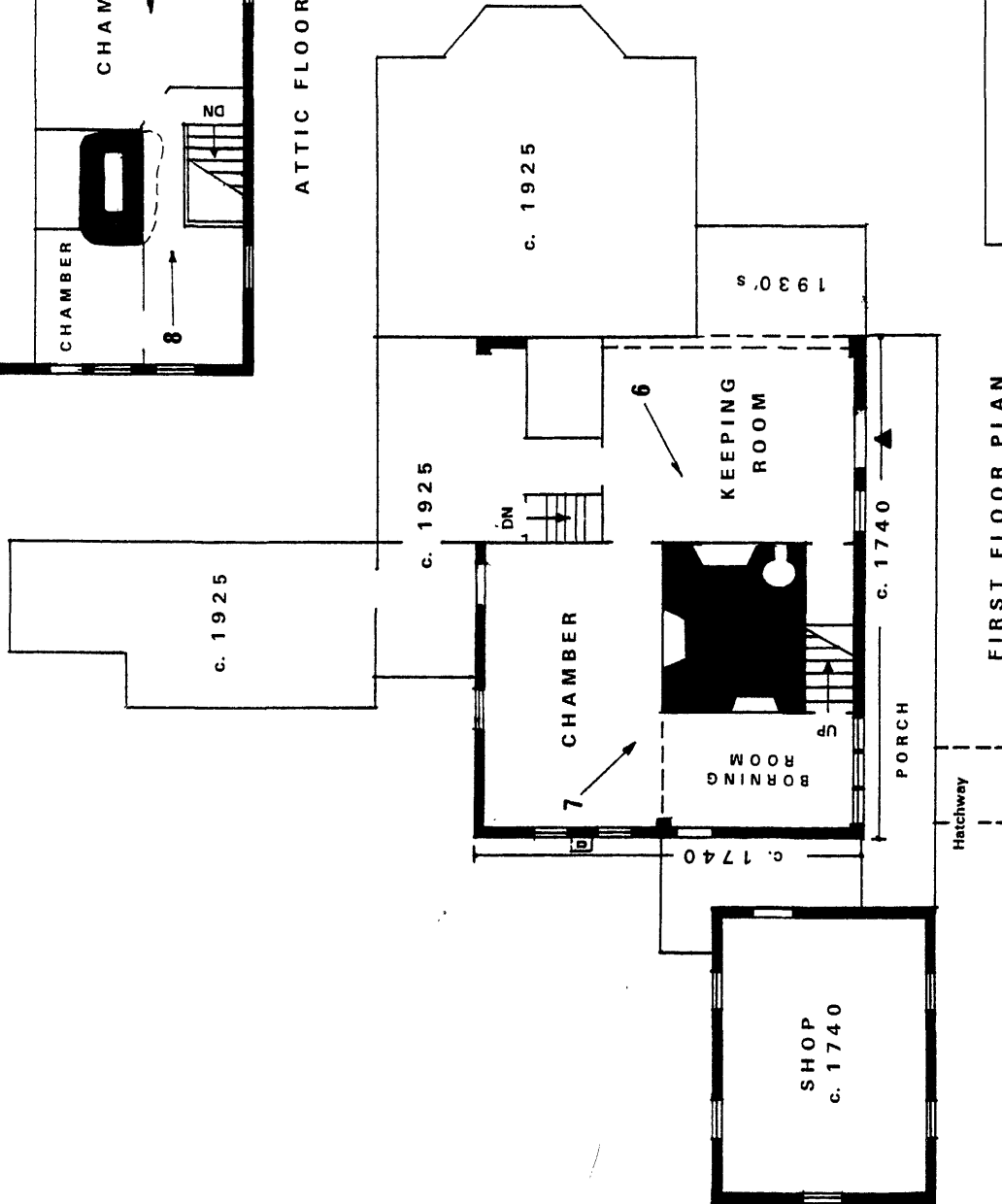
Designated on the Ridgefield Tax Assessor's Map E16 as Lot 90, the nominated property is described in the Land Records of Ridgefield, Vol. 508, page 561, and Vol. 493, Page 53.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries encompass all the land and historically associated buildings constructed and restored during the period of significance (c. 1740 - c. 1940).



ATTIC FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

**EXHIBIT A: FLOOR PLANS**

BENEDICT HOUSE & SHOP  
Ridgefield, Fairfield County, CT

#s with arrows: photograph views

J. Cunningham 4/98

Dimensions from field measurements  
Approx. Scale: 3/32" = 1'

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Benedict House and Shop, Ridgefield, Fairfield County, Connecticut

Section number Photo Page 1

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**List of Photographs**

Photographer: Cunningham Preservation Associates, LLC

Date: 4/98

Negatives on file: Connecticut Historical Commission.

1. Facade of house and shop, facing N
2. Facade of house and shop, facing NE
3. West and rear elevations of house and shop, facing SE
4. Barn and west elevation of house and shop, facing E
5. East elevation of house, facing W
6. Keeping room, facing SW
7. Fireplaces in chamber and borningroom, facing SE
8. Hall and stairs in attic, facing E
9. East chamber in attic, facing W