

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any 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 certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

1. Name of Property

historic name Skippy House

other names/site number Seely, Nathan House

2. Location

street & number 175 Grand Street

not for publication

city or town Mamaroneck

vicinity

state New York code NY county Westchester code 119 zip code 10543

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 at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Richard Rupert DBAHO 3/27/15
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register removed from the National Register

other (explain:)

For Edson H. Beall 5.18.15
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

5. 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 the count.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

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

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC / Residence

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: Brick, Stone
walls: Wood
roof: Asphalt
other: _____

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Skinny House is located at 175 Grand Street in the Washingtonville neighborhood of the Village of Mamaroneck in Westchester County. The rear of the property's lot backs onto I-95, the Village's northern boundary. Situated on the western side of Westchester County, Mamaroneck has several inlets to the Long Island Sound. The Village is divided into eastern and western halves by a railroad line, first built in 1848. The Sheldrake River runs through the low-lying Washingtonville neighborhood on the east side of the railroad. Although its streets and lots were laid out by 1867, Washingtonville was slow to develop. The majority of the homes along Grand Street are bungalows and small "Cape Cod" homes that reflect the street's primary development during the early twentieth century. The street is lined by sidewalks; although there is no consistent setback, the majority of the houses are located close to the road. The Skinny House is situated on a 12.5-foot wide lot between two houses. The Skinny House is set back approximately 55 feet from the road, over twice as much as each of its neighbors. The front half of the Skinny House lot is divided into a short, paved driveway and a small flower garden with a central path of stone pavers that leads to the house. The nominated parcel is the 12.5-foot by 100-foot lot historically associated with the Skinny House.

The Skinny House, built 1931-1932, is a two-bay, three-story, clipped gable frame house that rests on stone foundation. The house is covered in wood shingle siding and measures 10 feet wide and 37 feet long. An entrance is located in each of the two bays on the façade; the eastern entrance leads into the house, while the western entrance leads into the basement. The west entrance projects away from the house; a front-gabled entrance porch with plain bargeboards supported by decorative brackets shades a wood panel door with nine lights. After the first few feet, the front-gabled roofline slants downward, following the angle of the staircase. A small, concrete patio sits at the base of the eastern entrance. Similar to the other entrance, the eastern entrance's wood panel door with nine lights is shaded by a front gabled entrance porch with plain bargeboards; the projecting gable is supported by brackets in a different style. A small, arched window is located to the east of the door. A mail slot is built into the wall to the west of the door. The entry door leads to a one-story section, two-bays wide by two-bays deep, with a front-gabled roof; the three-story section rises behind this section. A one-over-one replacement window within arched historic trim is located in the west bay on the second story. A shed roofed projection angles from the base of the window. A central one-over-one replacement window is located in the third story. Flower box brackets are located under the window. The house is capped by a clipped gable roof with flared bargeboards; a brick chimney is visible over the roofline.

The house's varied rooflines, masses, and levels are apparent from the east and west elevations. On the east elevation, three masses are apparent: the projecting entry to the basement, the one-story section, and the three-story section. The projecting entry has a half-bay entrance mass lighted by a casement window with narrow square panes. After the half-bay, the entry's front-gabled roofline angles sharply downward; it meets a short, front-gabled roof plane before it meets the one-story mass. The one-story, two-bay, front-gabled mass has a dormer window in the northernmost bay. The front-gabled dormer window has plain bargeboards, a wide window opening filled with a sash replacement window, and a small pointed window in the gable. Part of the roofline associated with the one-bay mass extends one bay into the three-story section. Toward the rear of the three-story mass, a cable extends from the third story to the ground to provide additional stability to the building. Two small one-over-one windows are located on the first floor, and a one-over-one replacement window is located within arched historic trim on the second story. A brick chimney and shed-roofed dormer window project from the roofline; a horizontal, sash replacement window is located within the dormer. On the west elevation, two windows light the first floor of the three-story mass, two one-over-one windows light the second floor, and a wide window lights the third floor.

The three-story section has a one-story, one-bay-long by one-bay-wide, shed-roofed section to the rear. A metal roof extends from this roofline to provide additional covered space to the rear of the building. The second and third stories of

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

the rear (north) elevation are each lit by a one-over-one window. A wooden lattice fence screens the small backyard space. A chain link fence marks the rear of the property.

The interior is divided into the basement cellar, and three floors of living space. The basement entrance leads to a straight staircase to the basement. The rear third of the basement is taken up by a large rock; rather than attempting to remove it during construction, Seely chose to build around it. A small interior stair in the northwest corner leads up to the first floor. Original floors, trim, and doors are retained throughout the house. The first floor is divided into a living room, kitchen, and pantry. In a reflection of the one-story room's gable roofline, the outer walls of the living room are slightly angled. On the south wall of the living room, a small cabinet door provides access to the exterior mail slot. The built-in library shelving is located in the ceiling on the west side of the room. A French-style door with glass panes leads to the kitchen. Beadboard wainscoting and historic trim have been retained in the kitchen. The original cast-iron stove, refrigerator, and sink, which were all moved into the building during construction, remain. A one-bay-wide pantry extension is located on the west. The pantry includes built-in shelving and is lit by an eight-over-one sash window. Two sets of winder staircases are located in the southwest corner of the kitchen; one leads to the basement, while the other leads to the upper floors. The walls of the stairhall leading to the second floor is lined with beadboard. The second floor has a bedroom and a full bathroom. The bathroom is located in the rear (north) corner of the floor. It retains original fixtures and has a medicine cabinet built in to the wall. The bedroom has built-in cabinetry and shelving on the south wall. The third floor is one bedroom space. A railing runs around the stairway opening on the floor. A small closet is located in the rear (west) corner of the floor, and a salvaged Greek Revival mantelpiece decorates the east interior wall.

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Social History

Ethnic History

Period of Significance

1931-1932

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Nathan Thomas Seely

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Nathan Thomas Seely

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance for the Skinny House spans from the beginning of the house's construction through its completion in 1932

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

Constructed in 1931-1932, the Skinny House is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the areas of Social and Ethnic History and under Criterion B for its association with African-American carpenter and building contractor Nathan Thomas Seely. Nathan Thomas Seely (1895-1962) built the Skinny House on an extremely narrow lot of donated land after he lost his home to foreclosure and his company to bankruptcy during the early years of the Great Depression. During the mid-1910s, Nathan and Lillian Seely moved to the Washingtonville neighborhood of Mamaroneck. The neighborhood, located near the railroad line on the edge of the Village, slowly developed over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was home to a community of first-generation immigrant, predominantly Italian, and African-American families. Westchester County's African-American population grew dramatically as a result of the Great Migration during the early decades of the twentieth century. In response to the demand for good housing within his community, Nathan Seely and his brother Willard founded Seely Brothers Inc., a construction company that aimed to build for African-American clients. Seely hired Italian masons from the Washingtonville neighborhood, as well as African-American laborers for the company's projects. Seely Bros. purchased lots within the Washingtonville neighborhood and built several homes, including Nathan Seely's own house. The Great Depression devastated Westchester County's economy, and especially its housing industry. After Nathan Seely lost both his house and his company, his neighbor Panfilo Santangelo, an Italian immigrant and stonemason, offered Nathan a twelve-and-a-half-foot strip of land between the Santangelo home and the former Seely home for Seely to build upon. Seely drew up blueprints for the ten-foot-wide Skinny House and built the house entirely from salvaged materials. Although owner-building was not uncommon among immigrant and African-American communities during the early twentieth century, the multi-gabled Skinny House is notable for its efficient and beautiful design, careful engineering, and effective interior plan. Challenged by a narrow lot and minimal financial means, Seely created a house that demonstrated both his ingenuity and the desire to provide, above all else, housing for his family.

Early History of Mamaroneck

One of New York's original twelve counties, Westchester County was established in 1683 by the New York General Assembly. Early settlers established small, agricultural hamlets across the county; Mamaroneck, a small community on the Long Island Sound, held its first town meeting in 1697. Due to its proximity and easy access to New York City by land and water, Westchester County became a primary source of agricultural products for the urban center. Through the nineteenth century, farming was the primary industry in the rural townships of Mamaroneck and Rye Neck. Several prominent Mamaroneck landowners held slaves; they are recorded in the census through 1810.¹

While some slaves may have worked in agricultural production, many appear to have been domestic servants. By the time New York ended slavery in 1827, all former slaves in Mamaroneck had been freed. During the early nineteenth century, a small African-American community developed in southeastern Westchester County. Robert Purdy, an African-American from nearby Scarsdale, organized the Barry Avenue AME Zion Church in Mamaroneck in 1852. Some members, like Purdy, farmed in outlying communities while others worked as laborers, servants, or in other service industries in Mamaroneck or Rye. Within 50 years, the congregation had grown enough to require the construction of a new church building.²

¹ Larchmont Historical Society, "Slavery in Mamaroneck Township," <<http://slavery.larchmonthistory.org/>>; Roger Panetta, "Westchester, the American Suburb: A New Narrative," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 7-8.

² Katherine Samon, "Historical Wonders: Barry Avenue AME Zion Church," <<http://larchmonthistory.org/2011/01/historical-wonders-barry-avenue-ame-zion-church/>>; Lisa Keller, "Dreams Delivered: Following Diversity's Path in Westchester," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 336; Federal Census, New York, 1880.

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

Mamaroneck and Rye's natural harbors created an effective natural port. This natural advantage inspired the creation of a small fishing and shipping industry in the village. By the early nineteenth century, a small commercial and industrial center developed along the Boston Post Road, which ran near the harbors of Mamaroneck and Rye Neck. These two traditional transportation avenues were improved upon after the New York and New Haven Railroad reached Mamaroneck in 1848. The new line, the first to directly connect New York and Boston, was so successful that a second track was added soon after its completion. In addition to speeding transportation to urban centers, the railroad also facilitated economic and population growth in the townships.³

Only three years after the completion of the railroad, local developers laid out the village of Washingtonville. Apparently aspiring to create a successful commuter suburb, they situated the village close to the new station. Although the village is shown on the 1858 Westchester County map, its streets appear unfinished; Washingtonville's street layout and lots were finalized by 1867. The speculative development, situated on flat land near the Sheldrake River and across the tracks from Mamaroneck's primarily commercial and industrial sections, was slow to be settled. By the early 1860s, "flat lots" and "hill lots" in Washingtonville were being sold at Westchester County tax sales. The village's marginal, flood-prone land and relative distance from Mamaroneck and Rye's more developed village centers made Washingtonville unattractive to buyers with more substantial means. Of the 251 lots within the neighborhood, which spanned from Franklin Street through Warren Street (north of Grand Street; no longer extant), only 33 had been built on by 1867; a small number of additional lots had been purchased but had not been built on. By 1881, the number of buildings in the neighborhood had only increased to 37.⁴

Rather than bringing an influx of commuters, the New Haven Railroad facilitated business travel and became an ideal way for wealthy families to travel to the Long Island Sound. By the late nineteenth century, hotels were built to accommodate travelers and weekend tourists and large summer estates lined Mamaroneck's waterfront. The New York and New Haven Railroad expanded to four tracks in 1888 to accommodate its increasing traffic. Designed suburban communities for railroad commuters, including Tarrytown Heights, Rochelle Park and Rochelle Heights in New Rochelle, Lawrence Park in Bronxville, and Park Hill in Yonkers, were constructed across lower Westchester County. The number and size of these communities grew after the introduction of electrified commuter lines in 1903 and reached new heights during the 1920s after increased automobile ownership among white, middle-class families began to spur more rapid suburbanization.⁵

Smaller, service communities, primarily made up of African-American and immigrant families, developed around each of the white, middle-class suburban enclaves in lower Westchester County. These early, affluent suburbs relied on service workers for domestic tasks, as well as the landscaping and construction workers needed to build new homes and infrastructure. As a result, some of Westchester's highest populations of African-Americans were in the affluent communities near Mamaroneck: Yonkers, New Rochelle, and Rye.⁶

³ Edward F. DeLancey, *History of the Town of Mamaroneck in the county of Westchester and the state of New York* (New York, n.p., 1886), 24; Panetta, "Westchester," 19.

⁴ M. Dripps, *Map of Westchester County, New York. From Actual Surveys by F.C. Merry* (New York: M. Dripps, 1858); F.W. Beers, *New York and its Vicinity 1867* (New York: F.W. Beers, 1867); George Washington Bromley, *Village of Rye Neck, Village of Mamaroneck* (New York: G.W. & W.S. Bromley, 1881); Village of Washingtonville, Surveyed by Charles W. Hopkins, May 12, 1851, Westchester County Clerk; "Westchester Tax Sales," *Eastern State Journal*, (undated, 1858-1861); "Westchester Tax Sales," *The Yonkers Statesman*, Feb. 15, 1872; Edward F. DeLancey's 1886 description of the distance of the railroad station from the village is particularly striking. "The New Haven Railroad runs through the Town, but so far north of the village, the harbor and the necks on each side of it and the sound, that neither can be seen from the station." DeLancey, *History*, 25.

⁵ Susan Cochran Swanson and Elizabeth Green Fuller, *Westchester County: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning, 1982), 149; Barbara Troetel, "Suburban Transportation Redefined: America's First Parkway," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2006); Panetta, "Westchester," 22-27, 31, 48-49.

⁶ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 23-25; Keller, "Dreams," 336, 356.

Skippy House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

Nathan Seely's Early Years

Born in New York in 1847 to two New York natives, Charles Seely likely lived and worked in Westchester County for much of his life. By 1892, he settled in New Rochelle and married his wife Anna. Working as a night watchman, Charles supported his wife and their growing family. Charles and Anna's oldest child, Nathan Seely was born on February 24, 1893. He studied in school through the tenth grade. After his father's death ca. 1907, Nathan began working to help support his mother and eight brothers and sisters. By 1910, at the age of seventeen, he had begun working as a carpenter. His mother, Anna, worked as a dressmaker and his brother and sister worked as a fruit driver and domestic servant, respectively. Nathan was an ambitious and an ambidextrous young man, who always had a nub of a pencil tucked behind one ear, and a small black work ledger tucked in his pocket. He learned to speak conversational Italian and liked to tell jokes.⁷

In 1915, Nathan married Lillian Beatrice Booth (1895) of New Haven, Connecticut, the daughter of a Pullman Porter on the railroad. Around that time, Nathan and Lillian moved to 53 Grand Street in the Washingtonville neighborhood of Mamaroneck. While the neighborhood was still full of empty lots, it had continued to grow over the past thirty years; the 1914 Westchester County Atlas shows at least 75 buildings in Washingtonville. During the early twentieth century, Washingtonville had begun developing into a blue-collar suburb of Mamaroneck. In 1910, one-third of the neighborhood's population was Italian; other first-generation immigrants and African-Americans made up much of the remaining two-thirds. Members of the Italian community, which had connections to the village of Roccasecca in central Italy, primarily worked in gardening or public works. Many were stoneworkers; a stone quarry was located on Grand Street just south of the neighborhood. Washingtonville fit the pattern for what historian Andrew Wiese described as "the residential geography of domestic service." Low-lying, near the railroad tracks, and on the edge of the township, the land was undesirable to middle-class whites, could be obtained relatively cheaply, and remained unregulated by public or private land-use restrictions.⁸

Nathan and Lillian had two children while living at 53 Grand Street: Lillian Seely (b. 1918) and Nathan T. Seely Jr. (b. 1920). The Seely parents emphasized musical education and academics in their household. Seely's daughter, Lillian, went on to study opera with a well-known European teacher, Mademoiselle Mezzo-Soprano, Mildah Polia and his son, Nathan Jr., was the first African American at Mamaroneck High School to become a member of the National Honor Society.

In the early days of his career, Seely took small jobs that spanned the gamut, from building flower boxes, repairing screens and roofs in the affluent homes of Larchmont, New Rochelle and the historic Heathcote Hill. As the jobs multiplied, he took on more demanding work like building terraces and garages. Seely started to work with his younger brother, Willard Seely (1897-1984) in 1923. The two began to strategize about starting their own contracting company. Seely pursued night school where he learned the skill of drafting blueprints.⁹

The Seely Brothers Entrepreneurship in the Roaring Twenties

A wave of African-American individuals and families began moving north during the early twentieth century. Though this movement had begun during the late nineteenth century, it increased in scale during the mid-1910s. Between 1916 and 1918, more than 400,000 African-Americans moved to urban areas outside of the south. During the course of the

⁷ Doris M. Seely, interviewed by Julie Seely, 2011, from Unpublished Manuscript, *Skippy House*, Julie Seely; Federal Census, New York, 1900-1910.

⁸ Mamaroneck City Directory, 1915; G.W. Bromley & Co., *Westchester County 1914* (New York: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1914), 206; Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 147-150; Wiese, *Places*, 15-17, 27 (quote).

⁹ Federal Census, New York, 1920. Nathan Seely is listed as a builder "working on own account"; Mamaroneck City Directories, 1915-1916; The 1915 & 1916 city directories show Willard living with Nathan, but by 1920 Willard is living with sister's family on Warren Street in Washingtonville.

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

Great Migration, spanning from 1916 through 1970, over six million African-Americans moved to cities in the north, midwest, and west. These families sought to escape the extreme poverty and structural racism in the rural south, and to find jobs and to create better educational opportunities for their children. One in five African-American migrants to the north settled in a suburb. Although some migrants to New York settled in industrial communities upstate, many made their way to established African-American neighborhoods in New York City and its surrounding suburbs. During the first half of the twentieth century, Westchester County had the third highest African-American population in the state. Suburban communities in Westchester County were particularly attractive as they offered jobs, established African-American communities, inexpensive land, fuel, and transportation, and lacked building restrictions.¹⁰

Hoping to cater to this growing African-American population, Willard and Nathan Seely established Seely Brothers Inc, an African American-owned building contracting company in 1925. The brothers purchased several tracts of land in the Washingtonville section of the Village of Mamaroneck, and planned to build single-family homes, duplexes and apartment buildings for people of color.¹¹ The mission of the company is outlined in Seely's brochure entitled "*Homes For Colored People*." The opening paragraph states: "Every colored man needs a home. That statement does not require proof. It is the dearest wish of every individual of every color or race to have a clean, decent place in which to house his family, in which to bring up his children in peace and comfort."¹²

The Seely Brothers recognized that the "great increase in recent years in the colored population of the North... has brought with it a very serious housing problem." Through their construction business, Willard and Nathan hoped primarily to serve their community: "It is for that great purpose that Seely Brothers, Inc., has been organized. It will supply colored people everywhere with homes."

Seely's "*Homes For Colored People*" brochure rallied his community to invest in the Seely Brothers Corporation. His stock prospectus language was straightforward and optimistic.

"Part of the preferred stock of the company is now being offered for sale to a select list of colored people....Among holders of this common stock will be divided all the additional earnings of the company. These should be very large... Don't you want to join with the other men... and aid in great work? Remember, if you do you will be sure of two things; First, you will greatly aid your own colored race by supplying homes. Secondly, you will make money for yourself."¹³

Within the brochure, the Seely Brothers described potential projects, as well as their short term and long-term business goals to build: "apartment houses, stores, lodge rooms, amusement halls, one and two family homes." They also proposed acting as a small-scale development company which would buy and subdivide land, and build homes which could be rented in the short term and eventually sold.

The Seely Brothers' brochure reflects a clear understanding of the needs and desires of African-American families, as well as the challenges they faced. Like white families who moved the suburbs, African-Americans bought into the "suburban dream" – namely, the desire for positive suburban social environments, good jobs, and single-family homes in a semi-rural environment. Unlike middle-class whites, who were more likely to view a house as an asset or investment, African-Americans and blue-collar, immigrant workers shared a vision of a house and land as a tool for economic survival. A house could offer income (e.g. renting rooms), supplement wages (e.g. gardening, etc.), and be relied upon as irrevocable shelter. As such, homeownership served as both an economic hedge and a status symbol within these communities. To achieve this goal, it was common to "underconsume" resources; this might include owner-building over a period of time, self-provisioning, delaying improvements such as utilities, or sacrificing childrens' education. Due to

¹⁰ Wiese, *Places*, 5, 37, 68-69; Keller, "Dreams," 336.

¹¹ Westchester County Land Records, Town of Mamaroneck, 1923, Liber 2417, Page 351; Westchester County Archives, April 1925

¹² Seely Brothers Inc., "Homes For Colored People," Advertisement, ca. 1925, Private Collection of Julie Seely.

¹³ Seely Brothers Inc., "Homes For Colored People."

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

these core values, working-class immigrants were *more likely* to own their own homes than native, middle-class white families.¹⁴

Although African-American families shared these values with white blue-collar workers, they typically faced additional challenges based on their race. African-Americans tended to be limited in where they could buy property, whether as a result of personal prejudices or outright restrictions. Lower wages and more unstable employment also made achieving ownership more difficult. As a result, no single path to homeownership was most common. Some hired builders, others acted as owner-builders, while others used a combination of paid and volunteer labor. For those families with the means to hire them, Seely Brothers Inc. promised to facilitate the process for African-American buyers. In addition to its offer of well-built, reliable homes, the company also placed families within established African-American communities. Furthermore, by working with African-American business owners and builders, buyers were shielded from the casual or structural racism they might encounter otherwise.¹⁵

During the height of its success, Seely's company employed a secretary, engaged an attorney and owned six Mack trucks. Nathan had a diverse group of employees and often hired Italian American masons and laborers, many from Washingtonville. During the early 1920's the company office (no longer extant) was located at 95 S. Lexington Avenue in White Plains.

Early building projects included several single-family homes and a three-family house on Warren Street, in Washingtonville.¹⁶ Nathan Seely also designed and built a seven-room personal residence on Grand Street in Mamaroneck in 1926. The house, still extant, was designed for his wife, Lillian, and showcased many amenities considered very modern at the time, including a central heating system and indoor plumbing.¹⁷

During the mid-1920s, Seely built a large company tool shed between his residence and that of his neighbor, Mr. Panfilo Santangelo. When Mr. Santangelo bought the lot, he turned Seely's tool shed into a chicken coop. Westchester County land records from 1929 show Seely, his wife and Willard turned over two parcels of land, Lot 200 and Lot 196, to company investor, Attorney Oscar LeRoy Warren.¹⁸ The deed was later corrected in 1947 to name Seely's neighbors, Panfilo and Maria Santangelo as the grantees of the lots instead of Warren.¹⁹

The Depression Years In Mamaroneck

The Black Tuesday stock market crash on October 29, 1929 sent ripples across the nation's economy. Within months, new construction nearly came to a halt, banks began to fail, wages dropped, and workers were laid off in large numbers. Westchester County faced the same hardships, but was particularly affected by home foreclosures and the slowdown in the construction industry. Property values dropped dramatically, and owners found their homes too large and too expensive to maintain or continue to pay for. In the town of Mamaroneck, the consequences of the Depression were severe. There were so many home foreclosures that the town imposed a ban on the placement of "For Sale" signs on front lawns for fear of "panic." The Larchmont Aid Society was established to assist destitute families.²⁰

¹⁴ Wiese, *Places*, 68-69.

¹⁵ Wiese, *Places*, 68-69.

¹⁶ "Real Estate and Building," *Mamaroneck Paragraph*, 1923, Microfilm, Mamaroneck Public Library.

¹⁷ Nathan T. Seely, "Specifications For A Residence To Be Erected At Mamaroneck, N.Y. For Mrs. Lillian B. Seely, Nathan T. Seely Sr., Acting As Architect," July 5, 1926. Private Collection of Julie Seely.

¹⁸ Westchester County Land Records, August 8, 1929, Liber 2962, Page 476.

¹⁹ Westchester County Land Records, Sept, 1929, Liber 2965, Page 238.

²⁰ Larchmont Avenue Church, "Our History," <http://www.lacny.org/our_history/article388832c7634325.htm>; Panetta, "Westchester," 58; Gray Williams, "Westchester County: Historic Suburban Neighborhoods," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 187-191.

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

Historian Cheryl Lynn Greenberg gives rare insight into the impact of The Depression on African Americans after the hopefulness of the 1920s:

African Americans, freed from bondage but subject to segregation, discrimination, and violence, had nevertheless managed to find a foothold in the American economy and civic life by the 1920's... The Depression era proved bleak for black workers and their families as they struggled against the dual burdens of racism and economic depression. More often than not, however, even in the North, employers did not allocate lay off and cutbacks fairly, and racism continued to affect employment patterns. Being white doubled one's chance of finding work. The Depression was hardly kinder to the tiny black middle class.²¹

The 1930 census reported that 23,000 African-Americans resided in Westchester County. That marked a 334% increase from the County's population of 5,300 in 1900. Though African-American families were able to survive, if not thrive, on during the 1920s, most struggled during the Great Depression. The construction, landscaping, and general labor jobs that men had typically worked in became rare; even when public works jobs became available, black men were often passed over in favor of white men. Domestic work was typically more stable, and allowed women to keep their families afloat. African-American women without more permanent domestic work waited in designated lots to be picked up for low-paying day work by white housewives.²²

While construction companies were particularly hard-hit, Seely Brothers Inc.'s emphasis on the African-American community left it in an especially fragile position. Demand for new houses from African-American buyers disappeared, as families refocused their efforts on simply surviving. Nathan and Willard's company was forced to close. The 1930 United States census reflected that Nathan Seely, listed as a builder, had been on the unemployment rolls for greater than two years. Seely went bankrupt, and his personal home was turned over to the R.R. Bank and Loan Association in May of 1930.²³

The Skinny House

For a few months, Nathan relied on local friends and family. He had developed friendships with neighbors and community members during his time in Mamaroneck, and his sister, Edith, and her family lived nearby on Nostrand Avenue. The Santangelo family, in an act of neighborly cooperation, donated Lot 196 back to Seely in 1931 so he could erect a house for his family. The former Seely tool shed turned Santangelo chicken coop still sat on the narrow, twelve-and-a-half foot lot and became the foundation for what would become the Skinny House. Despite his dire financial circumstances, Seely began to stockpile salvaged building materials leftover from contracting jobs and discarded in junkyards.²⁴

In February 1931, Nathan Seely designated himself "acting as architect" and drafted a blueprint of construction plans for the ten-foot-wide, multi-gabled Skinny House.²⁵ The house was built to last and fortified with salvaged materials, including railroad tie beams for foundational support. Digging out the foundation for the house posed some challenges to Seely as the narrow lot was situated near a quarry formation. He encountered a massive boulder in the ground and made the decision to leave it there and dig out his cellar from around it. Similarly, he circumvented another obstacle when he realized the family's large pieces of furniture and piano would not fit through a narrow front door, so he decided to erect

²¹ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask For An Equal Chance: African-Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

²² Keller, "Dreams," 335-336; Priscilla Murolo, "Domesticity and its Discontents," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 355; Wiese, *Places*, 55-56.

²³ Federal Census, New York, 1930.

²⁴ No records for this transaction were found in the Westchester County Land Records; Federal Census, New York, 1930.

²⁵ Nathan T. Seely, "Blueprint of Skinny House, Nathan Seely Acting As Architect," February 7, 1931, Private Collection of Julie Seely.

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

the frame of the house around them. To ensure the stability of the three story house, he attached steel sway cables to the upper story and anchored in the ground.

Owner-building was not uncommon in African-American and immigrant neighborhoods during the early twentieth century. Nathan Seely was likely familiar with friends and neighbors who had progressively built their homes as they had the time on nights and weekends and, more critically, the financial resources to do so. The usage of scrap lumber of salvaged materials was common, and construction could extend over long periods of time. Nathan's construction skills and knowledge enabled him to efficiently and quickly build a high-quality, if small, house. Often, owner-building was a family and community affair. Although Nathan Seely designed the Skinny House and was its primary builder, he was at least assisted by his son, Nathan Jr.²⁶

The final house included both planned and improvised features based on what was available. Seely found spruce studding and built double flooring. For less visible portions of the house, such as its framing, Seely used alternate materials freely; salvaged bannisters are present among framing materials of uneven sizes. Although none of the salvaged windows match in shape or size, Seely sought out more stylish, decorative windows; many had arched frames, or featured numerous small, screen-like panes. He also found colorful Creo-Dipt stained roof shingles for the house. Well-known for its use at projects like the Williamsburg Governor's Palace and Frank Lloyd Wright's Gray Cliff, the shingles were commonly used on large, suburban homes and were noted for their ability to retain colors.²⁷

He included elements of charm and conveniences for his wife as well. Besides the three ornate gables in the front facing façade, he added a ledge for flowerpots just under the second level window. He designed a small two-way mailbox portal, adjacent to the front door, where the postman could drop the mail and his wife could retrieve it from within the living room. He also built a compartment in the living room ceiling he called the family's "library," where books and company ledgers were stored. Nathan Seely and his family moved into the Skinny House soon after its completion in 1932.

Although relatively uncommon, narrow houses have been built around the world. The vast majority of historic narrow houses were constructed in dense, urban settings; in many cases, the house was built to fill an alley between existing rowhouses. Amsterdam is noted for its narrow houses, many of which filled alleys along its canals; 22 Oude Hoogstraat, the city's narrowest house, was built ca. 1733 and is six-and-a-half feet wide and 16 feet deep. New York City's narrow house, 75 ½ Bedford Street is nine-and-a-half feet wide and was constructed ca. 1873 to fill an alley between two rowhouses. In some cases, small houses were built to fill odd-shaped lots between buildings; The Wedge in Great Cumbrae, Scotland, which was built ca. 1875 and measures 47 inches at one end and 11 feet at the other, and the ca. 1925 Montlake "spite house" in Seattle, which measures 55 inches at one end and 15 feet at the other, are both good examples of the pie-shaped, narrow house type.

As with the Montlake house, narrow houses are often also "spite houses." A "spite house" is defined as a building that was constructed or modified with the clear intention of irritating or angering neighbors or other parties with a stake in the land; a spite house may block light or access to neighboring properties, and many are built in impractical forms. Some of the narrowest houses in the United States are recognized as "spite houses." A ca. 1830, seven-foot-wide "spite house" in Alexandria, Virginia was built to fill an alley after the neighboring property owner grew tired of carriage wheels scraping against the walls of his house. Boston's Skinny House, a 10.4-foot-wide house built ca. 1874, was reputedly built as a result of a dispute between two brothers.

Narrow houses in suburban settings, like Mamaroneck's Skinny House, are especially rare. Unlike dense urban centers where land is often at a premium, no matter how small the lot, builders and owners in suburban settings were more likely

²⁶ Wiese, *Places*, 73-75; "Nathan T. Seely Jr., 'skinny house' builder, dies at 68," *Gannett Westchester Newspapers*, March 30, 1989.

²⁷ National Park Service, "Roofing for Historic Buildings: Wood Shingles,"

<<http://www.nps.gov/tps/education/roofingexhibit/wood.htm>>.

Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

to have the opportunity to simply build elsewhere. A survey of narrow houses in the United States resulted in only a few suburban examples. Located within a turn-of-the-century suburban neighborhood, the 10-foot-wide Alameda spite house was built by Charles Froling after the city took away the majority of his lot to build a street. The Skinny House in Long Beach, California is most comparable to the house in Mamaroneck. Built in 1932 on a ten-foot-by-fifty-foot lot within a suburban neighborhood, the stuccoed, two-story, Tudor-style house was the result of a wager. The builder, Nelson Rummond, had received the small lot as payment for a loan, and a friend bet him that he could not build a habitable house on such a narrow lot.

Although there are a number of houses that are narrower than Mamaroneck's Skinny House, it is a rare example of a narrow house built within a suburban setting. In addition, it is a much rarer example of a narrow house built by an African-American or other ethnic minority; all of the other American narrow houses identified were built by individuals of European ancestry. Furthermore, Mamaroneck's Skinny House stands as the polar opposite of a spite house; it reflects friendship and compassion between neighbors, rather than animosity.

Later History

Nathan Seely lived with his family in the Skinny House through the early 1940s. By 1942, he left Mamaroneck to work in New Haven, Connecticut. Nathan T. Seely died in 1962. Lillian Seely lived in the Skinny House until she entered a nursing home in 1986. The Santangelo family bought the house in 1988, and has used it primarily as a rental property. As the twentieth century wore on, the house began garner regional, statewide, and eventually international interest.²⁸

The Skinny House was designated a Mamaroneck Village landmark on January 27th, 1986, and was listed on the Westchester County Inventory of Historic Places on March 6, 1991.²⁹ In recent years, the Skinny House has garnered new attention. A Facebook group, entitled "I Remember the Skinny House," was created in 2010; it is mostly comprised of people who grew up on Mamaroneck's Grand Street and who, as adults, still love the house. In 2014, the Seely family website, www.skinnyhouse.com, introduced Nathan Seely and his house to a national audience interested in African American history in Westchester County.

The house remains under the care of the Santangelo Family, who have the owners of the Skinny House for nearly thirty years. Through their stewardship, they continue to honor the friendship between Panfilo Santangelo and Nathan Seely that resulted in the construction of the Skinny House.

²⁸ "Nathan Thomas Seely," in *World War II Draft Cards (Fourth Registration) for the State of Connecticut*, State Headquarters: Connecticut, Microfilm Series: M1962.

²⁹ "Skinny House Gets Landmark Designation," *Gannett Westchester Newspaper*, January 28, 1986; Westchester County Inventory of Historic Places certificate for The Skinny House, March 6, 1991.

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

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Skinny House

Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York

County and State

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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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

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

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

_____ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
_____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .03 acres
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>18</u> Zone	<u>605844</u> Easting	<u>453450</u> Northing	3	<u> </u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing
2	<u> </u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing	4	<u> </u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map with scale.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

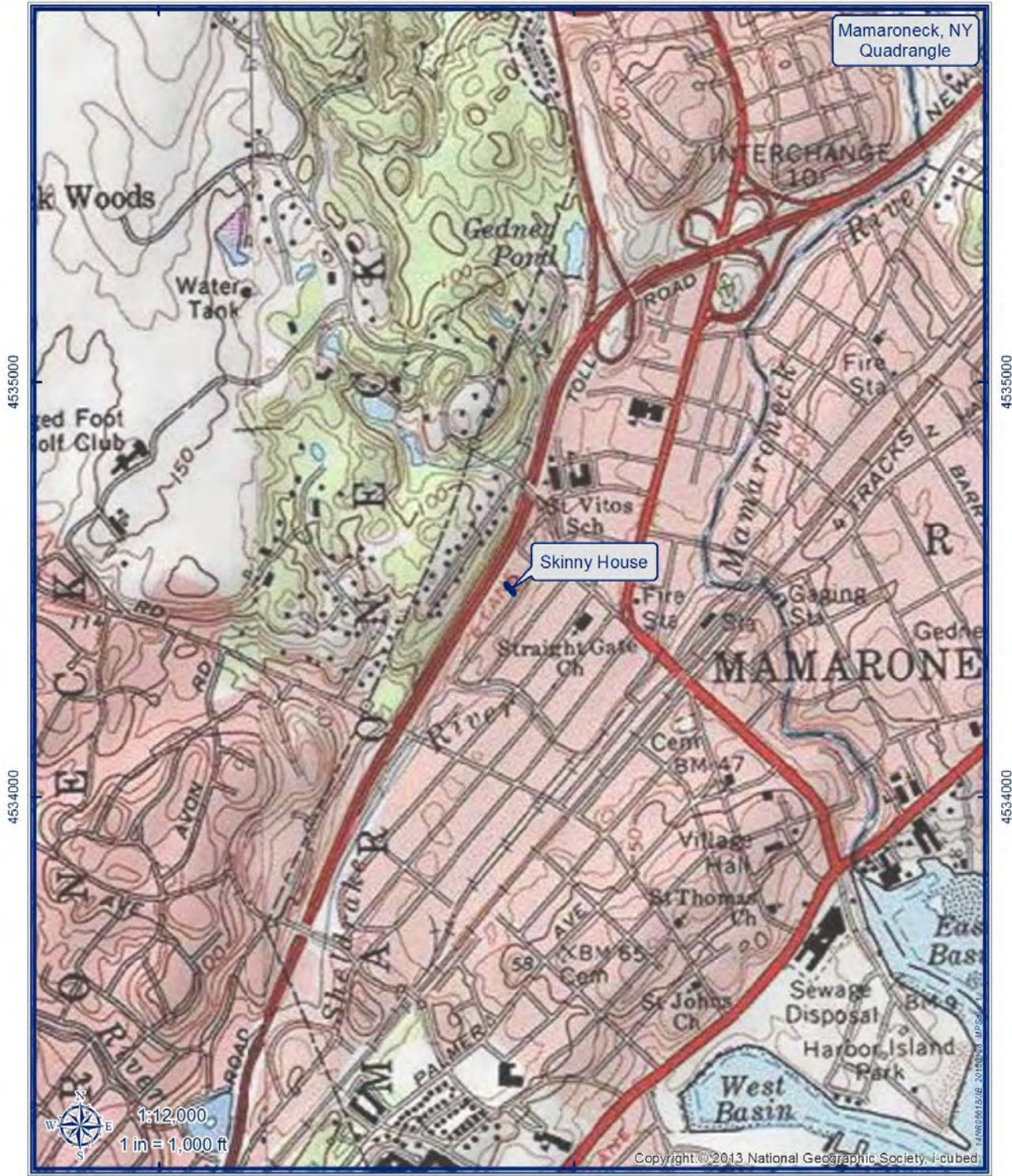
The boundary was drawn to include the parcel historically associated with the Skinny House.

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

Skinny House
Mamaroneck, Westchester Co., NY

175 Grand Street
Mamaroneck, NY 10543



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter
Tax Parcel Data: giswww.westchestergov.com



 Skinny House



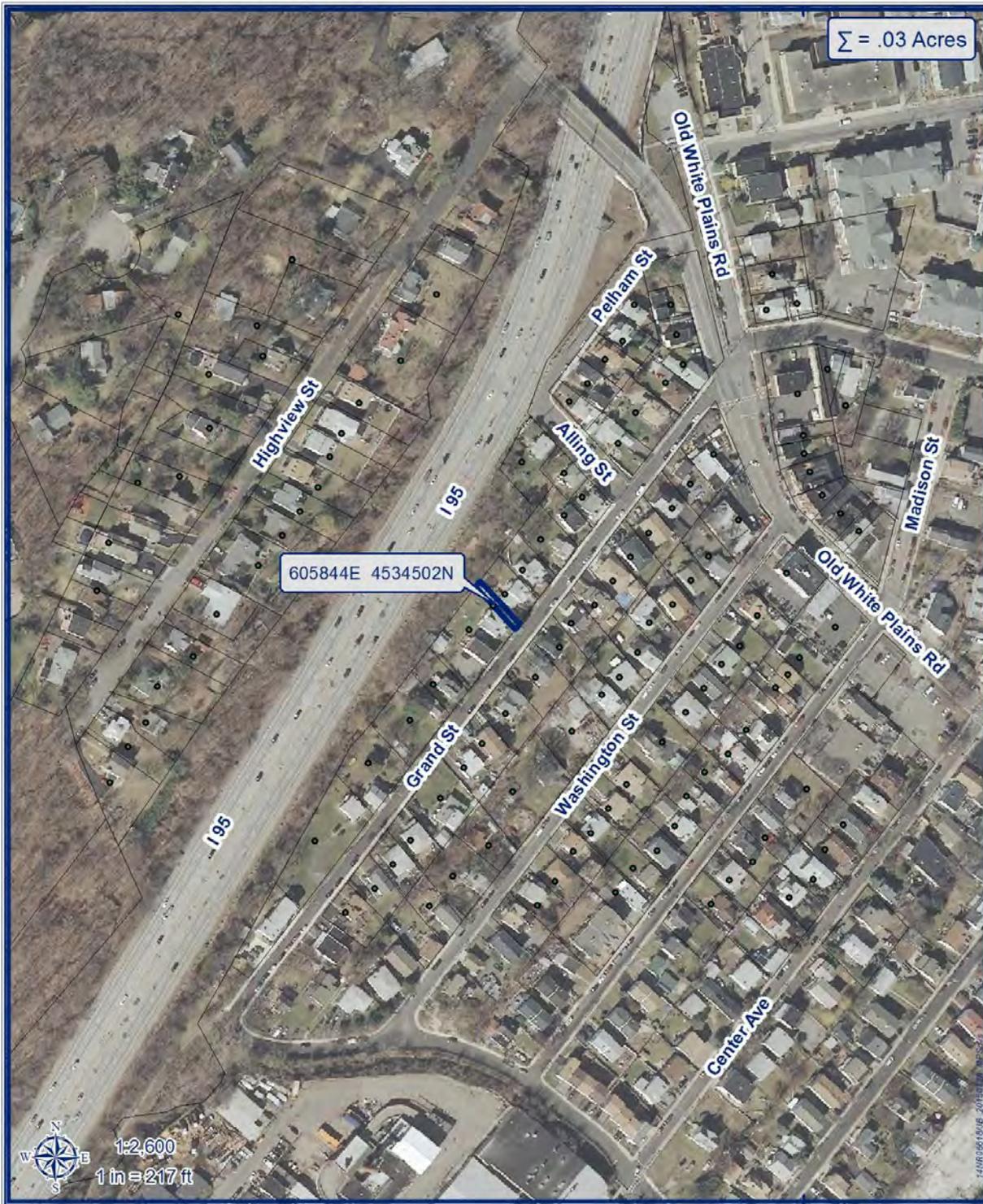
**Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation**

Skippy House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

Skippy House
Mamaroneck, Westchester Co., NY

175 Grand Street
Mamaroneck, NY 10543



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter
Tax Parcel Data: giswww.westchestergov.com



Skippy House



Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Julie Seely, edited by Jennifer Betsworth (NY SHPO)
organization _____ date February 2015
street & number 20599 Holyoke Drive telephone _____
city or town Ashburn state VA zip code 20147
e-mail Drjulie83@yahoo.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Skinny House

City or Vicinity: Mamaroneck

County: Westchester State: New York

Photographer: Bill Krattinger

Date Photographed: October 2014

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 1 of 6 | NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0001
Façade and setting, facing northwest |
| 2 of 6 | NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0002
Façade and setting, facing northwest |
| 3 of 6 | NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0003
West elevation, facing east |

Skinny House
Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
County and State

- 4 of 6 NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0001
Interior, Second Floor, staircase, facing north
- 5 of 6 NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0001
Interior, Third Floor, facing southeast
- 1 of 6 NY_Westchester County_ Skinny House_0001
Interior, Third Floor, Mantelpiece, facing east

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Nancy Picarello

street & number 179 Grand Street telephone _____

city or town Mamaroneck state NY zip code 10543

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

Skinny House
Name of Property

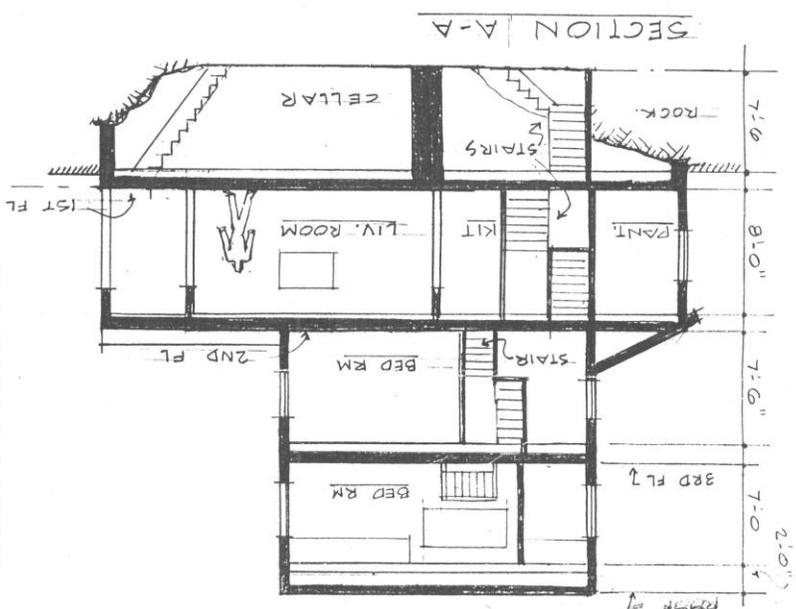
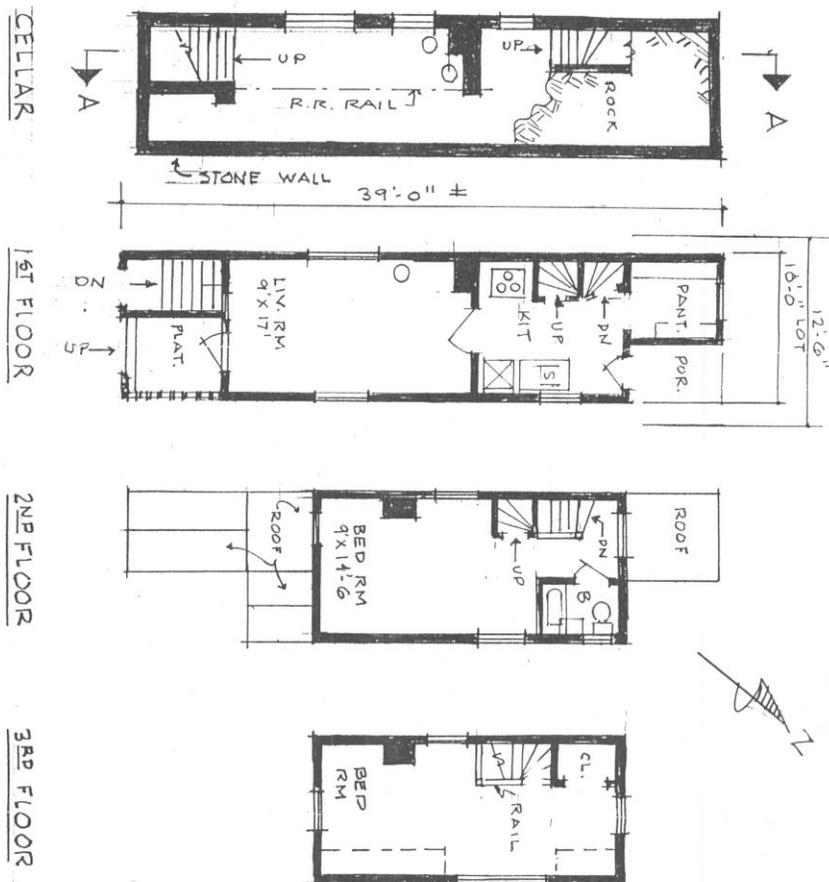
Westchester Co., New York
County and State



The Skinny House circa 1936
From the Collection of Julie Seely

Skinny House
 Name of Property

Westchester Co., New York
 County and State



THE NARROW HOUSE
 175 GRAND ST. MANK. NY
 MEASURED BY N.B. NOV. 1995
 SCALE 1/8" = 1'-0"















UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY Skinny House
NAME:

MULTIPLE
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: NEW YORK, Westchester

DATE RECEIVED: 4/03/15 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 4/24/15
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 5/11/15 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 5/19/15
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000235

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 5-18-15 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in
The National Register
of
Historic Places

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER _____ DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.

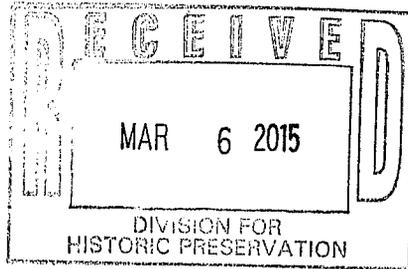


MAMARONECK
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

P.O. BOX 776 MAMARONECK, NEW YORK 10543

March 3, 2015

Jennifer Betworth
Director for Historic Preservation
Peebles Island State Park
PO Box 189
Watford, N.Y. 12188



Dear Ms Betworth;

The Mamaroneck Historical Society enthusiastically
enclosed the nomination of Mamaroneck's Skinning House
for listing on the National and State Register of
Historic Places.

The structure alone warrants this listing. A true
vernacular structure in the purest of terms. Built
out of necessity in the deepest darkest days of the
Great Depression, it is a model of cross cultural & cross
racial cooperation during a time when this was
the exception not the rule.

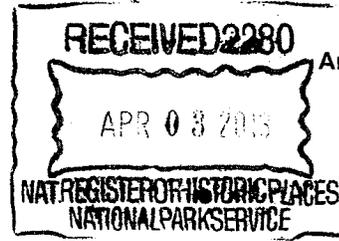
The Skinning House's listing should be the
beginning of a compelling story that should be taught
and shared with all who merely moved at
it's footprint on a tiny block in our Mamaroneck.
It's not merely the structure it's the compelling
tale of cross racial cooperation and survival when
it was need the most. That message aside from the
structure makes this nomination one of the best in the
last decade.

Respectfully Yours in History
Donald March
President



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

Division for Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189
518-237-8643



Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor
Rose Harvey
Commissioner

31 March 2015

Alexis Abernathy
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
1201 Eye St. NW, 8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005

Re: National Register Nominations

Dear Ms. Abernathy:

I am pleased to submit the following eight nominations, all on disc, to be considered for listing by the Keeper of the National Register:

Canajoharie Historic District, Montgomery County
Waccabuc Historic District, Westchester County
Skinny House, Westchester County
Crown Point Green Historic District
Barkin House, Nassau County
Murphy Grist Mill, Dutchess County
Williamsbridge Oval Park, Bronx County
Union Temple of Brooklyn, Kings County

I wish to call your attention to the map for the Waccabuc Historic District. On the tax map, you can see that a tiny sliver of land has been excluded that is connected to a much larger non-historic parcel west of the district (the intent was to exclude the larger parcel). However, the sliver is so small that on the USGS and ortho maps it cannot be seen. It just looks like an unnecessary solid line. We were not sure how else to indicate this. Please feel free to call me at 518.268.2165 if you have any questions.

Sincerely:

Kathleen LaFrank
National Register Coordinator
New York State Historic Preservation Office