

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

FLORENCE GRISWOLD HOUSE & MUSEUM

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: FLORENCE GRISWOLD HOUSE & MUSEUM

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 96 Lyme Street Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Old Lyme Vicinity: N/A

State: CT County: New London Code: 011 Zip Code: 06371

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property Category of Property
Private: X Building(s): X
Public-Local: District:
Public-State: Site:
Public-Federal: Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing 1 Noncontributing 4 buildings
sites
structures
objects
1 4 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. 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): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Florence Griswold Museum is a two-story, five-bay, twin-chimney, frame house with a colossal Georgian Ionic portico. Located on a main street about one mile north of the center of the village of Old Lyme, the structure faces east, separated from the street by a stone wall and flanked by large shade trees. Built in 1817 to the design of Samuel Belcher, the house, painted yellow with white and dark green trim, consists of a main block and ell, little altered since construction. Here, from 1899 to the 1930s, Miss Florence Griswold conducted a boardinghouse for painters that was the center of the Lyme Art Colony. The house is now an art and history museum dedicated to the Lyme School of Art and the history of the region.

The broad steps of five risers leading up to the portico are 34 feet wide. The portico's four round columns with slight entasis stand on high 31-inch-square bases. The space between the central columns is wider than the flanking spaces. The column capitals consist of volutes joined by an egg-and-dart molding over a bead-and-reel. A band of panels in the portico soffit connects the capitals. Three side lights and a fanlight surround the wide six-panel central door. The fanlight is shaped as a three-center arch with reeded keystone. On either side of the doorway are two 12-over-12 windows with sills, molded surrounds, and dark green blinds. At the second floor, two similar windows, slightly diminished in height, flank a central tripartite window. The width of clapboards exposed to the weather diminishes from 3" to 2½" from top to bottom of the wall. Quoins embellish the corners of the house. The portico columns support an entablature of narrow architrave, plain frieze, and molded cornice with modillion blocks. The entablature extends around the main block. The cornice design repeats as the raking cornices of the flush-board pediment. The central window of the pediment is semi-elliptical in the Federal manner with radial muntins and reeded keystone. Four corbeled brick chimneys rise from the wood-shingled gable roof.

In the north side elevation, four windows at first and second floors, spaced in a 1-2-1 rhythm, are similar to those of the facade. The gable-end pediment is the same as that of the portico. The lower, two-story ell has, on this elevation, three smaller 12-over-12 windows at the first floor, three 12-over-8 windows at the second, a ramp from the rear for access by the disabled, and a single tall chimney. The south elevation of the main block is similar to the north, except that two 6-over-6 windows occupy the tympanum rather than a fanlight. These windows are joined by a half-round, arched molding with keystone in the gable peak. There is a shed-roofed columned porch on the south elevation of the ell. An early photograph shows the porch with four square posts; the present round columns appear to be a Colonial Revival alteration from the turn of the century. There is a modillion course under the eaves of the main roof on this elevation of the ell.

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On the interior, the front door opens to a plan of a central hall with two rooms to north and south. A three-corner arch, similar to that of the doorway, divides the hall into front and back sections; the soffit of the arch is paneled, as is the soffit of the portico between the columns. The stair rises on the south wall behind the arch, while a glazed, six-panel door leads from the back of the hall to the porch. The front of the hall ceiling is decorated with a round raised medallion which is encircled with Adamesque swags.

In the north front room, the three-center arch and keystone motif is again repeated over an alcove in the west wall. The fireplace mantel in this room is supported by paired reeded colonnettes. The mantel shelf, bowed in the center, breaks out in rectangles over the colonnettes. The firebox is surrounded by grey marble edged by a hatch-mark molding. The ceiling cornice molding is paralleled by a raised molding on the ceiling, a few inches in from the cornice. Doors to the room are six-panel, like the front door, with molded casings and flat molded caps, typical of most doors on the first floor. The south front room features a cornice of compound moldings, the most elaborate in the house. In the fireplace mantel the shelf breaks out over the single reeded, engaged columns to left and right and a hatch-mark molding surrounds the opening, but there is no dentil course. In the front rooms the windows are recessed in paneled reveals.

The mantel of the south rear room is similar, except that the flanking members are fluted pilasters. In the north rear room, which is the plainest of the four, the only original embellishment is the fluted pilasters of the mantel. There is a corner cupboard with butterfly shelves in this room, but since it does not reach the ceiling, it probably was not built for its present location. The floors throughout the first floor are boards, about five inches wide, painted.

The historic kitchen is in the ell. Its large brick fireplace, with beehive bake oven at the front left, is in the west wall. This room was used as the dining room during the decades of Miss Florence's boardinghouse. Its walls are covered with panels painted by the various artists in residence. In this, and other first-floor rooms, there are 43 such panels painted by 30 resident artists over a period of 20 years. Henry R. Poore painted the mural over the dining room fireplace mantel called "*The Fox Chase*." It is a helter-skelter scene of the artists, each identifiable, chasing across the landscape with Miss Florence's house at the far right.

The second floor is generally plainer than the first. In the second-floor central hall, the stair railing continues, ramped, around the stair well. There are four bedrooms. In the south front bedroom, the flanking pilasters of panels on high reeded bases make the mantel different from others in the house. The second floor of the ell, which is lower than the second floor of the main block, is used for offices and library. The attic of the main block is devoted to workrooms and storage spaces fitted in and around the massive purlins and their accompanying diagonal

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braces. According to tradition, when this house was built, an earlier structure was moved away to clear the site, but its ell was left behind and is the present ell. However this may be, in both the ell and the main block, the roof framing shows principal rafters let into a massive ridge pole by mortise and tenon, indicating similarity of age. The ridgepole of the main block is unusual for its join.

The basement of the house was rebuilt in a 1990 construction program which increased the ceiling height and provided a controlled environment for archives and storage of paintings. In the basement, the walls of the ell are parged, while the walls of the main block are not, suggesting that the two are different and the ell may indeed be older than the main block.

The premises now house the fine art collection of the Florence Griswold Museum, which consists of paintings, pastels, watercolors, drawings, prints, and sculpture. There are over 1200 works of art in the collection, of which 95% are by members of the early-20th-century Lyme Art Colony. An inventory of the Art Colony collection is appended (see p. 17ff). The museum also holds archival photographs and manuscript files for over 200 artists associated with Old Lyme during the first four decades of this century. In addition to the Art Colony collection, the museum, as headquarters of the Lyme Historical Society, maintains collections of local decorative arts, ceramics, textiles, tools, and toys.

Under the ownership of Miss Florence, the property was approximately 12 acres, laid out with barns, studios, and gardens as indicated by the conjectural plan in Figure 3. A shed was attached to the ell and two barns were to the rear. The second of the two barns stands today, but not on museum property. Miss Florence's house and land were sold in 1936 to an owner who built a house on the Lieutenant River, well behind the historic structure. In 1941, the Florence Griswold Association bought the house and 0.6 acre, the driveway, which leads to the house in the rear, coming under common ownership. In 1974, the museum acquired land to the south of the driveway on which the 18th-century Huntley-Brown House had been re-erected after being dismantled at a nearby location. With a new wing, it provides offices and meeting rooms for the museum. More recently, additional land to the south, formerly owned by Miss Florence, has been purchased, bringing the parcel that now goes with the museum up to five acres.

Four additional buildings on the museum property include a cinder block garage immediately behind the museum, the Huntley-Brown House, and a Colonial Revival house and garage on the most recently acquired land. All are non-contributing.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B X C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria: 1, 2

NHL Theme(s): XXIV. Painting and Sculpture
 E. European Influences
 1. American Impressionism

Areas of Significance: Architecture
 Art

Period(s) of Significance 1899-1936

Significant Dates: 1899, 1903, 1914

Significant Person(s): Florence Griswold

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Samuel Belcher

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

As one of the best known and most influential of the centers where artists in America painted, Old Lyme is part of the tradition that established regionalism--Sante Fe and Taos in the southwest, Northeastern seaports on the Maine Coast and Cape Cod, Woodstock, New York, and New Hope, Pennsylvania. It was also one of the most famous art colonies in America.

Painters at the end of the 19th century were increasingly interested in nature and painting out-of-doors. The Barbizon School in France, which had attracted a group of painters with similar interests, inspired an American, Henry Ward Ranger, to establish a 'New Fontainebleau in Connecticut'¹ in the village of Old Lyme. This enclave's most active years, from 1900 to 1915, were based in Miss Florence Griswold's house, a late-Georgian mansion on the main street. Barbison gradually gave way to Impressionism under the dominant influence of Childe Hassam, and the Griswold house rapidly became the center of American Impressionism.

The reasons behind the proliferation of art colonies in America between 1890 and 1910 are varied and only a few can be suggested here. In part, the summer colony was an outgrowth of the Barbizon and Impressionist tenets of *plein-air* painting and the direct impression of nature, popularized by the American painters' exposure to these trends in Europe and in the art schools at home. Fueled by their aversion to conditions in overcrowded and industrial cities, artists who shared the period's "cult of the outdoors" took off for rustic country settings to bathe at the fountain of rejuvenation--that of nature itself. Wedded to this summer exodus from the city was the artist's impulse to create a congenial environment suited to his every need.... And, too, an important factor was the Impressionists' new awareness of the American landscape, built not upon the grandiose theatricality of the Hudson River School, but on expressing a painter's intimate personal reaction to the native characteristics of the land.²

Before the Griswold home became one of the most important art colonies, it was a somewhat faded late-Georgian house with Federal details. It also had an interesting history. The house was built in 1817 for William Noyes II, scion of a founding family of Lyme, by, according to tradition, Samuel Belcher

¹ Grace L. Slocum, "An American Barbizon: Old Lyme and Its Artist Colony," *New England Magazine* 34 (July 1906):563.

² Jeffrey W. Andersen, "The Art Colony at Old Lyme," *Connecticut and American Impressionism Exhibition Catalog*, University of Connecticut, 1980.

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(1779-1849). Born in Bellingham, Massachusetts, Belcher is chiefly known for his work as builder/architect for the Ellington Meetinghouse (c. 1806, dismantled 1868) and the Lyme Meetinghouse (1816, burned and re-built, c. 1907). From about 1821 he resided in Hartford, Connecticut, where he built the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (c. 1830, demolished c. 1920).

While relatively little information about Belcher's career has come to light, the documentation of 19 of his transactions in the Hartford Land Records and the valuation of his estate at \$36,168.89³ indicate that his business life was substantial. The known examples of his work all display a restrained classical tradition, somewhat old-fashioned, with only limited recognition of the contemporary trend toward Federal attenuation and Adamesque delicacy. The Lyme Meetinghouse, Florence Griswold Museum, and American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, Hartford, all are fronted by the same heavy multi-story portico.

Captain and Mrs. Robert Griswold became the third owners of the house when they bought it in 1841. The Griswolds were also a distinguished Lyme family, Matthew Griswold having been the first magistrate of Saybrook Colony, of which Lyme was a part. Robert Griswold's father, Roger Griswold, served as governor of Connecticut, 1811-1812. Robert Griswold was captain of a North Atlantic packet, sailing regularly from New York to London on the Black X-Line. After his retirement, his wife and three daughters conducted a school for girls in the house from 1878 to 1892. Thereafter, Florence Ann Griswold (1850-1937), the youngest of the daughters, converted the premises from a school to a boardinghouse.

In a watershed visit during the summer of 1899, Henry Ward Ranger (1858-1916) became a boarder. Ranger came to paint. He had returned a few years earlier from Europe, where he had painted out-of-doors at Barbizon, near Paris. In Old Lyme, he found a suitable equivalent American location for *en plein air* painting; a landscape "only waiting to be painted," as Ranger put it, and to Old Lyme he brought painting in the Tonal tradition of the Barbizon School. Ranger was a leading exponent of Tonalism in American art, combining outspoken opinions with a genial personality. His presence attracted other artists, including Louis Paul Dessar, Carleton Wiggins, William Henry Howe, Bruce Crane, Frank Vincent DuMond, Clark Voorhees, Henry Rankin Poore, Allen B. Talcott, Lewis Cohen, and Henry C. White. Florence Griswold, beginning a new life at age 49, provided shelter and a social center for the painters, who enjoyed living at the boardinghouse famous for its good table and its good times. By using the attic, accommodation could be provided for as many as 15 artists at any given time.

³ *Hartford Probate Records*, volume 50, page 267.

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For the Barbizon-inspired artist, Old Lyme yielded a wealth of subjects. Like Corot and Rousseau before them, these painters of Lyme sought to attain a realism, based upon what they saw, with a subjective interpretation of nature, based upon what they felt, in Tonalist harmonious modulation of color.

In 1903, the growing group at Old Lyme was joined by Frederick Childe Hassam (1859-1935). Childe Hassam was also a strong personality but, as an Impressionist, he painted in a different manner than Ranger. Old Lyme did not support the divergent theories of the two men and Ranger moved on, leaving the painters at Old Lyme free to use the quick, short brush strokes, bright colors, and shimmering light-filled images of American Impressionism. From these trends and influences emerged the Old Lyme School, which synthesized the French Barbizon and American Impressionist styles, tempered by the American landscape tradition. The Old Lyme School claimed such participants as Willard Metcalf, Walter Griffin, William Chadwick, Edmund Greacen, Charles Ebert, Edward Simmons, Lawton Parker, Chauncey Ryder, Gifford Beal, Guy Wiggins, Edward Rook, Everett Warner, George Burr, and Gregory Smith.

A sense of the relaxed and congenial atmosphere that prevailed at Miss Florence Griswold's is conveyed in a historic photograph, c. 1905, showing the group gathered on the front portico. The picture demonstrates how little the house has changed since the turn of the century. The artists also left their work on the painted panels of the first floor. The dining room walls, especially, present a bravura exhibition of artistic talent and fellowship.

Childe Hassam painted a famous series of pictures of the Old Lyme Meetinghouse, but perhaps the most renowned architecturally related work is "May Night" (1906) by Willard L. Metcalf. This painting depicts the moonlit white columns of the house in contrast with the nighttime blues and greens of sky and foliage as Miss Griswold approaches on the stone walk. Metcalf offered the work to Miss Griswold to help pay his bill for room and board, but she declined, saying it was the best he had ever done. In confirmation of her judgement, "May Night" became the most celebrated of all Old Lyme paintings by winning the first Corcoran Gold Medal with a cash prize of \$1,000. It was purchased by the Corcoran Gallery of Art for \$3,000 in 1907, and has remained in the gallery's permanent collection. The success of "May Night" convinced other artists that they, too, could succeed by painting and learning at Old Lyme.

Old Lyme was one of several locations where artists gathered for annual out-of-doors painting in Connecticut. The Holley House at Cos Cob (Greenwich), where a colony was founded by John Twachtman in 1886 (now a National Historic Landmark), and J. Alden Weir's two farms at Windham and at Branchville (Ridgefield, recently made a National Historic Site in the National Park System), where he began to summer in 1883, also attracted artists. Some painters circulated from one location to another.

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Old Lyme was the prime location in Connecticut for Impressionist painting. The number of artists, the length of their stay, the amount of work they produced, and especially the quality of their painting all contributed to the long life of the colony.

At Old Lyme, starting in 1902, the artists banded together to sell their pictures with an annual show at the public library the first art colony exhibition in America. Innovatively organized as the Lyme Art Association in 1914, the group was able to build its own gallery in 1921 on land acquired from Miss Florence Griswold next door to her house. The gallery building was designed *pro bono* by the distinguished architect Charles Adams Platt (1861-1933), who was himself a successful painter and etcher before turning to architecture. For many years Miss Florence Griswold served as gallery manager.

Successive generations of young painters working in the Impressionist style along the shoreline of Connecticut came to be known as "the Giverny of America."⁴

Attracted by the colony's camaraderie and its *plein-air* attitude, many of these painters elected to take permanent residence in Old Lyme. Later, they formed the rank and file of the Lyme Art Association when it was organized in 1914. These actions, in a sense, institutionalized the colony and perpetuated the identification of Old Lyme as a center of American impressionism.⁵

A measure of the colony's success is illustrated by that which Willard L. Metcalf enjoyed as a result of his residence at Old Lyme.

Metcalf came to Old Lyme following a year spent in Maine working in relative isolation--he referred to this experience as his "Renaissance," the start of his "new" approach to landscape painting. By 1905, rumors were widespread in art circles that Metcalf was about to "break through." Recognition came the next year in November, 1906, at his near sell-out exhibition of Lyme canvasses at the St. Botolph Club in Boston. Critics waxed eloquent about Metcalf's "immense improvement." The next summer an article on the Lyme colony noted that

"One explanation of the remarkable jump Lyme has taken is that Willard Metcalf sold in three days \$8,000 worth of Lyme landscapes in the St. Botolph Club last winter.

⁴ Donelson Hoopes, *The American Impressionists* (New York: Water Gupstill Publications, 1972), p. 16.

⁵ Andersen, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

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This made Lyme sound like Standard Oil, and with no less enthusiasm than the gold hunters of '49, the picture makers have chosen Lyme as a place to swarm."⁶

It was ironic that the Old Lyme Colony was finally able to have its own gallery at about the time its national influence was beginning to wane. Younger artists were turning to experiments in European modernism. By the 1920s, many of the painters associated with the Old Lyme School were in their 60s. Time took its toll on Miss Florence Griswold as well. In 1936, a court-appointed conservator found it necessary to sell her property to meet her obligations. Fortunately, the new owner provided for her to continue living in her house rent-free until her death in 1937.

The campaign to memorialize Miss Florence and the Old Lyme Colony as the Florence Griswold Museum, now highly successful, had its modest beginning in the formation of the Florence Griswold Association, which was able to "buy back" the house and six-tenths of an acre in 1941 for \$5,750. The house opened as a museum in 1947. The Florence Griswold Association merged with the newly formed Lyme Historical Society in 1955; the Lyme Historical Society continues today as the entity owning the property.

⁶ Willard Metcalf Papers, *Archives of American Art*, microfilm roll N70/13, frame 507.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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"Lyme: A Chapter of American Genealogy." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. 52 (February 1876) 309:131ff.

Metcalf, Willard, Papers. *Archives of American Art*. Microfilm Roll N70/13.

Old Lyme Land Records: 5/389, 6/14, 7/83, 7/622, 24/329, 31/13, 31/368, 38/334, 38/336.

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Trowbridge, Bertha Chadwick, ed. *Old Houses of Connecticut*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922.

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 (Specify Repository): Lyme Historical Society

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 5 (five) acres

UTM References: Zone Northing Easting

A 18 4578100 723660

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property is shown by the white portion of the accompanying map (Figure 1) drawn at a scale of 1' = 90'.

Boundary Justification:

The nominated property is the land that is now part of the Florence Griswold Museum. Historically, this land was part of the estate belonging to the Griswold family, and was associated with Florence Griswold and her boardinghouse for artists.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: David F. Ransom, Architectural Historian

Street/#: 33 Sunrise Hill Drive

City/Town: West Hartford

State: Connecticut

ZIP: 06107

Date: 5 August 1992

Edited by: Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian
National Park Service

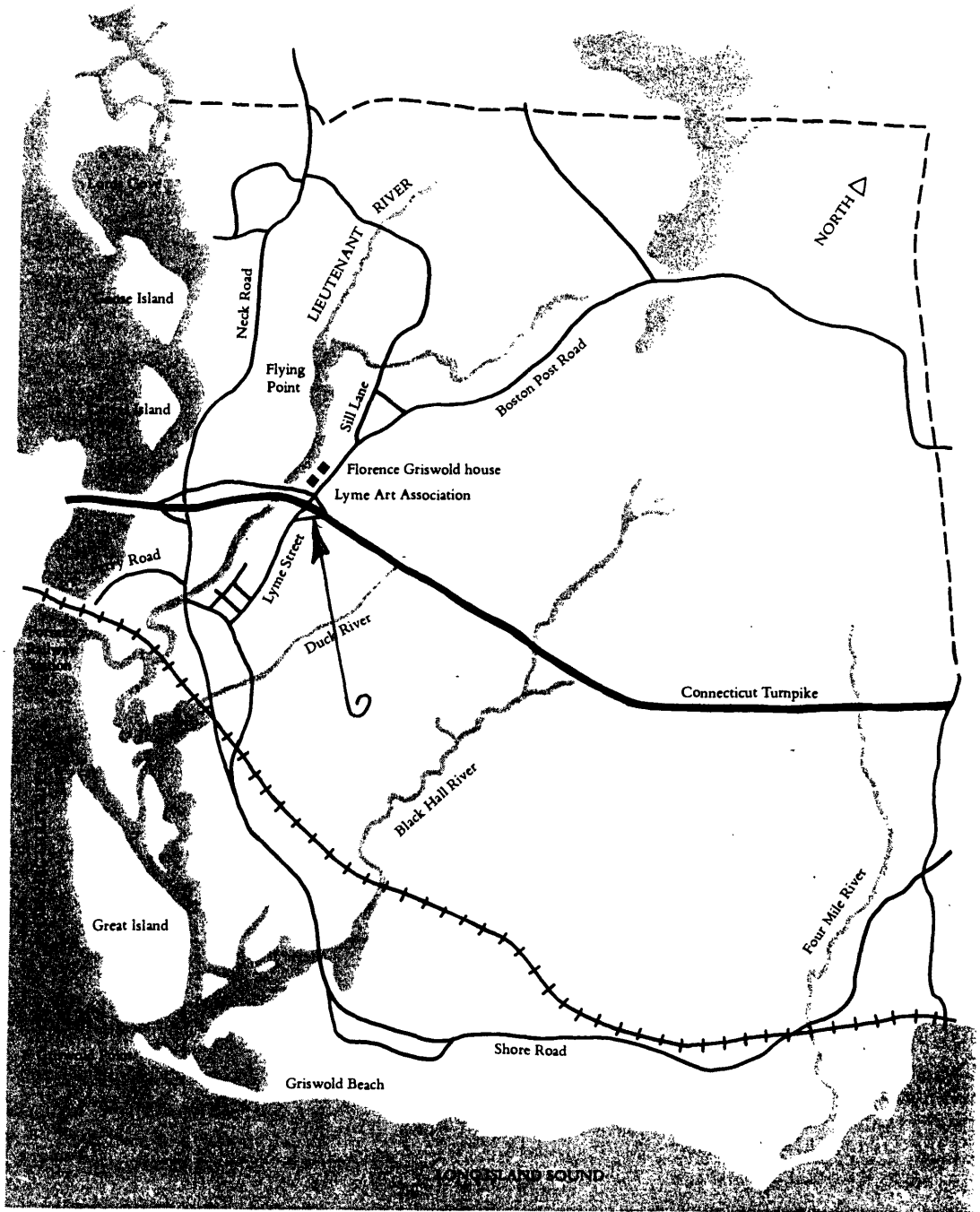
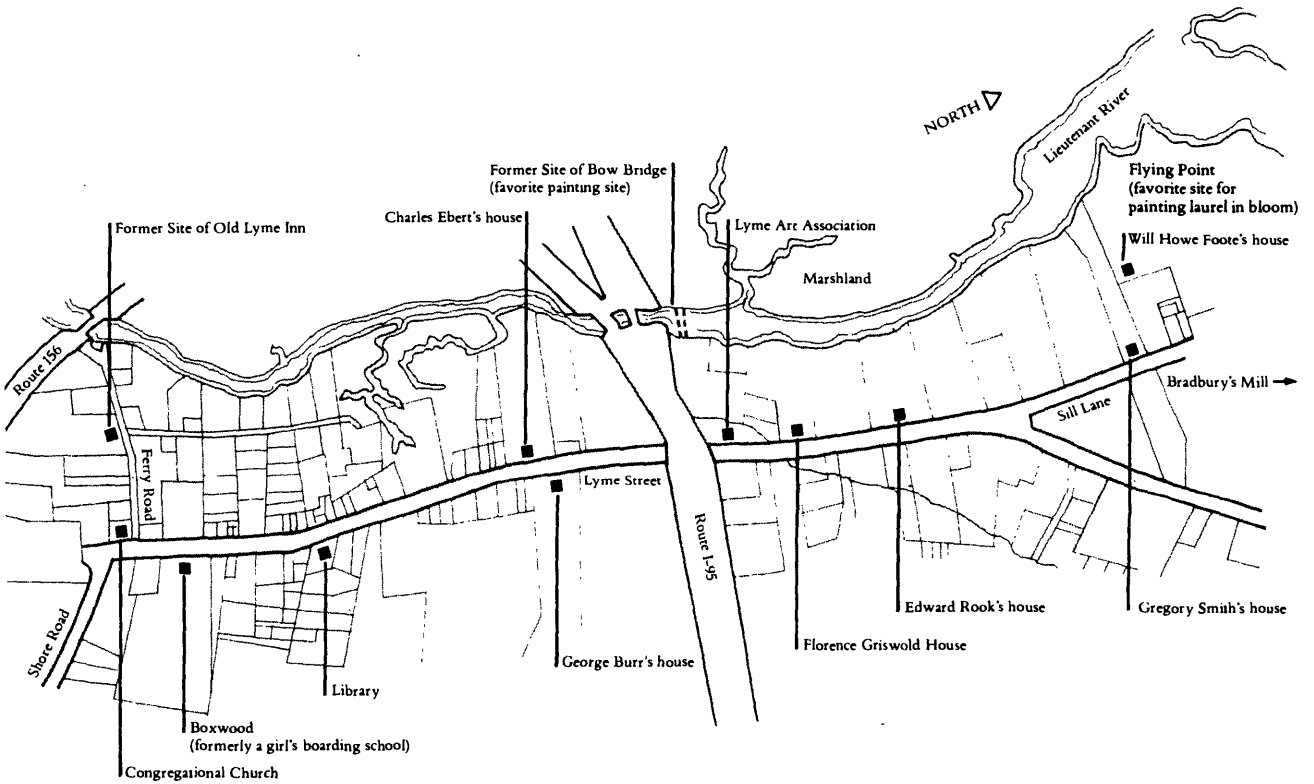


Fig. 1. **Lyme Street**, c. 1905. When the Lyme art colony began, "there was hardly a house on this street that didn't need shingling," recalled one of the artists. Only four new houses had been built on the street in the previous thirty years. Old Lyme was in sad shape — the victim of a declining shipbuilding industry that had once brought great prosperity to the town.

Old Lyme is located at the confluence of the Connecticut River and the Long Island Sound in Southeastern Connecticut.

Old Lyme's main street lies just east and parallel to the Lieutenant River, which was a shipbuilding center in the 19th century. In 1970, the Old Lyme Historic District was formed to preserve the historic center of the village. Favorite painting sites of the art colony, together with the location of some of the artists' houses, are noted on the map.



The Grounds of the Florence Griswold House

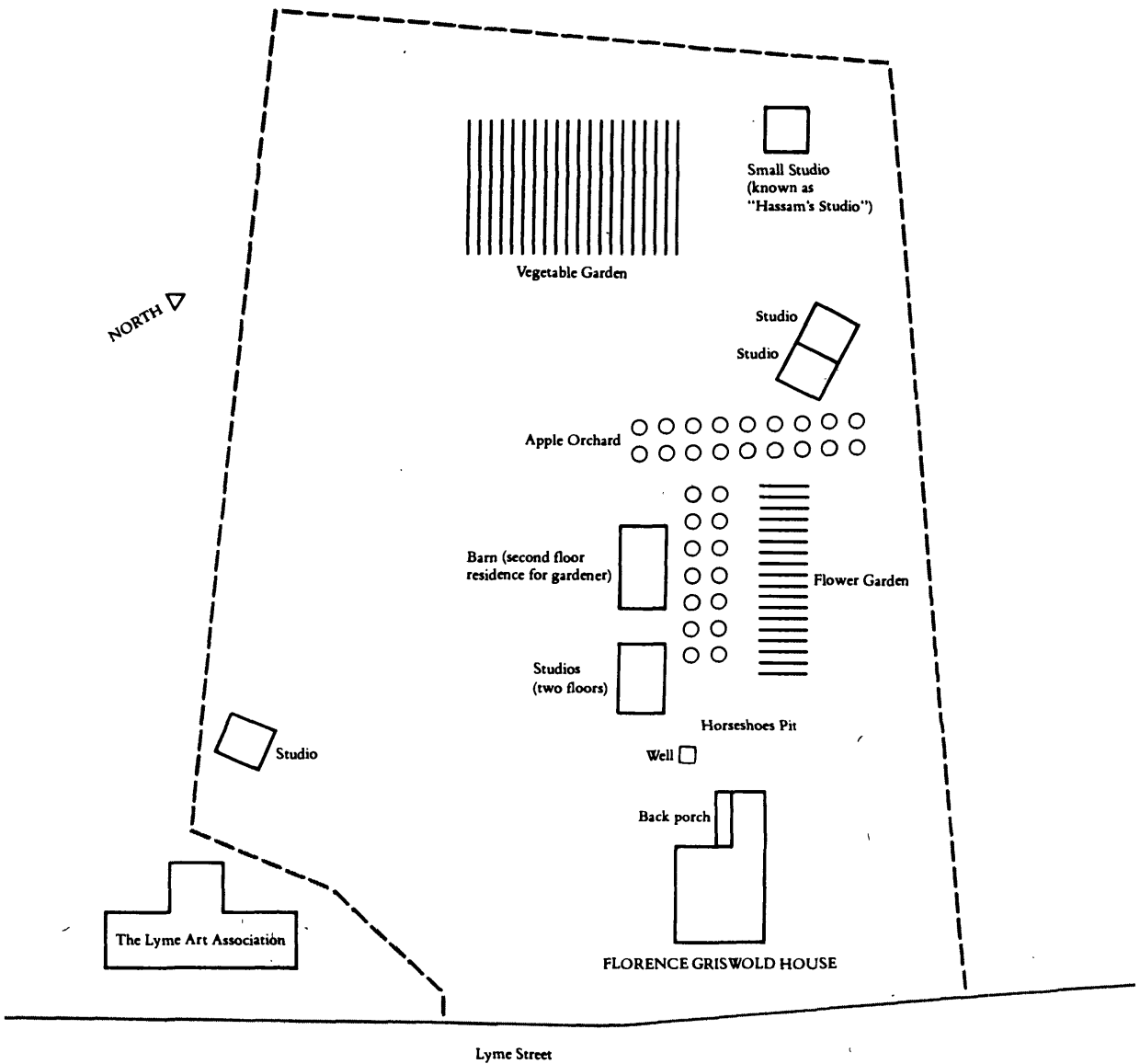
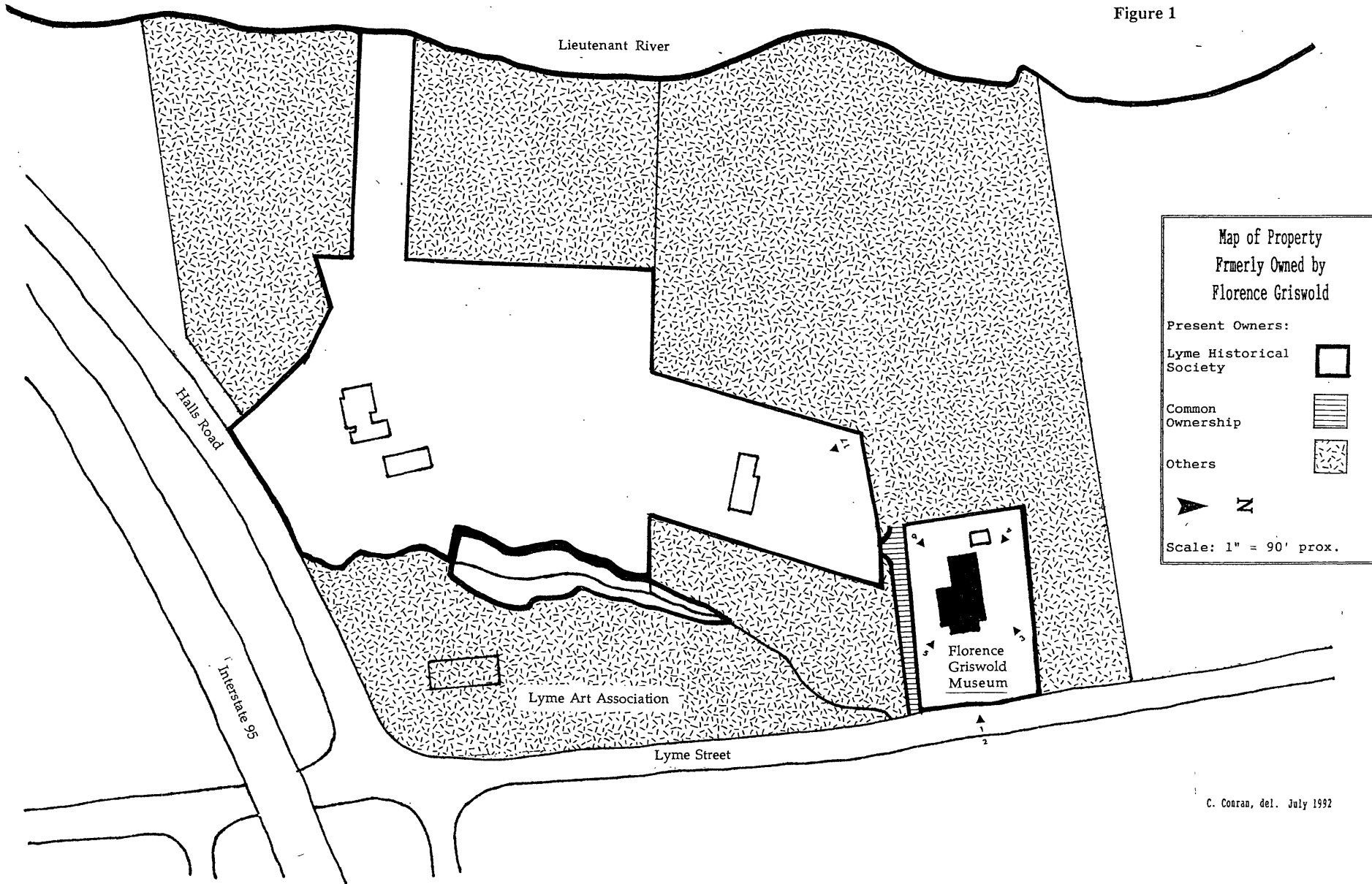
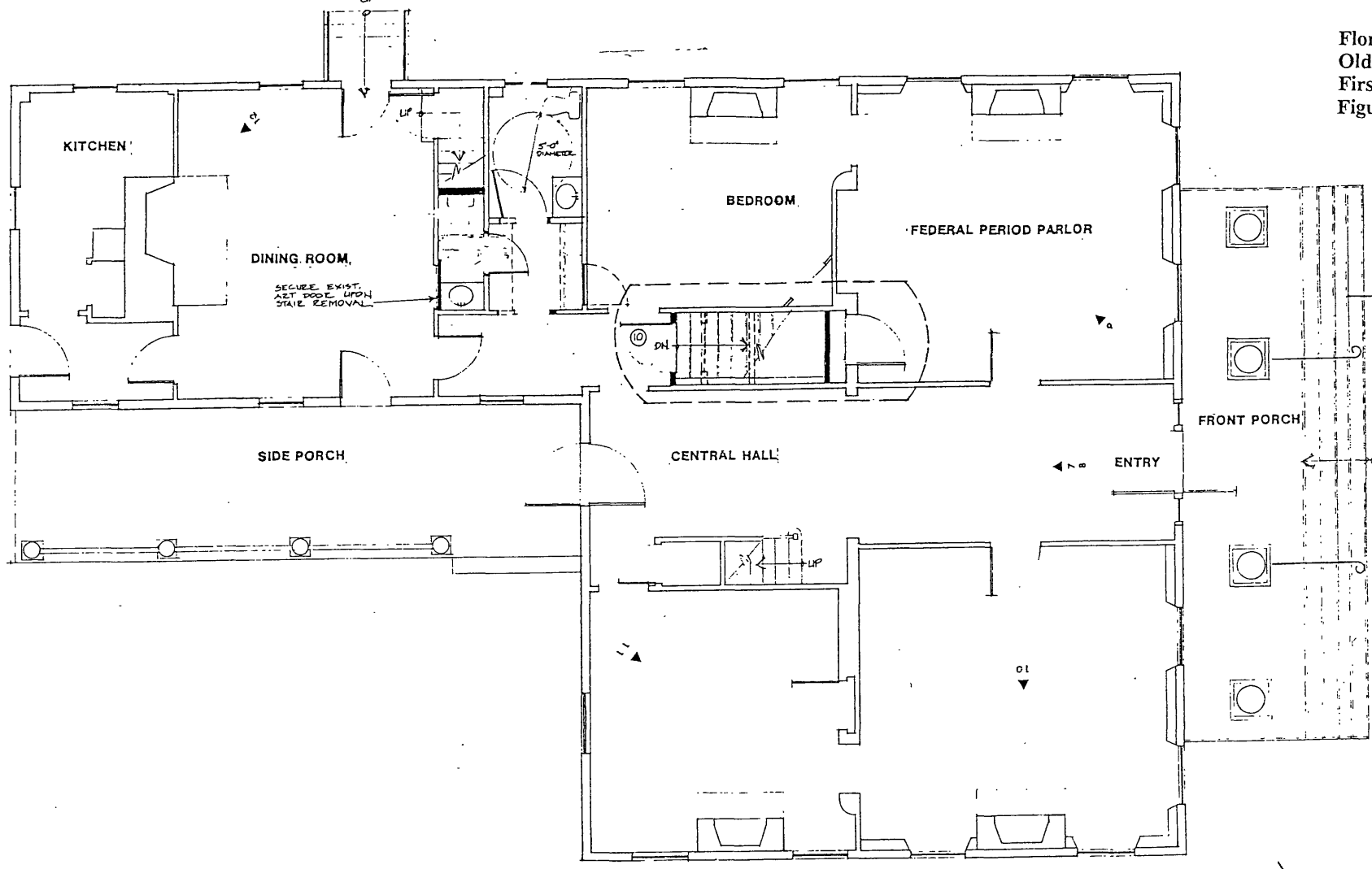


Figure 1



Florence Griswold Museum
 Old Lyme, Connecticut
 First Floor Plan
 Figure 2.

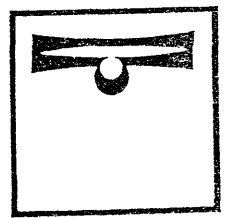
Scale 1" = 6.7'



**FLORENCE
 GRISWOLD
 MUSEUM**

LYME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

98 LYME STREET
 OLD LYME, CONNECTICUT 06371
 203 434 5542



**INTERDESIGN
 LIMITED**

PO BOX 250
 OLD LYME, CT 06371
 203 434 8083 FAX 434 3419

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"

1
 A-32

**Florence Griswold Museum
Old Lyme, Connecticut
Historic Site Plan
Figure 3**

