

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received JUL 3 1986  
date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Seventh Sister

and or common Gillette Castle

2. Location

street & number 67 River Road N/A not for publication

city, town East Haddam N/A vicinity of Middlesex 007

state Connecticut code 09 county New London code 011

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Commissioner Stanley Pac  
State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection

street & number 165 Captiol Ave.

city, town Hartford vicinity of state Connecticut

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. See Continuation Sheet

street & number "

city, town " state "

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title State Register of Historic Places See Continuation Sheet  
has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1986  federal  state  county  local

Connecticut Historical Commission  
depository for survey records 59 S. Prospect St.

city, town Hartford state CT 06106

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## 7. Description

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<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved    date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

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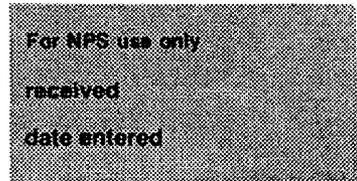
### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Seventh Sister is a curious 24-room castle-like dwelling of stone dramatically sited atop the highest and southernmost of the seven hills south of Middletown on the east bank of the Connecticut River in the towns of Lyme and East Haddam. The nearly three-quarter-mile long shore frontage of the wooded and naturalistically landscaped 122-acre estate affords a panoramic view of the unspoiled river valley and surrounding wooded hills. The picturesque three-story-plus-tower structure was designed by the owner, actor William Gillette, as a fanciful recreation of a crumbling Gothic ruin. Built entirely of rubble-coursed local fieldstone with steel floor joists, the exterior is distinguished by a bold picturesque silhouette created by asymmetrical multi-level massing. The northeast and northwest corners are set with flat-roofed towers joined to the main mass of the house by a stepped parapet detailed to suggest deteriorating, half-fallen walls, while the lower flat roofs are screened by a crenelated parapet (photograph 1). The third-level roof was used as a terrace. The picturesque profile of the house is enhanced by projecting stone window hoods and balustrades that accent the randomly placed and sized diamond-paned fenestration on the second, third, and fourth levels. The north elevation is set with a stone porte cochere which defines the main entrance on the ground level while the principal level of the west and south elevations is wrapped by a verandah detailed with stone piers and a stylized entablature (photograph 2). The verandah has a serpentine stone balustrade. Stone terraces with low drylaid fieldstone perimeter walls adjoin the verandah on the west and south elevations of the principal and ground levels to take advantage of the spectacular view of the river. The east elevation features a rustic-style raised porch of log post-and-beam construction set on a stone foundation which is an extension of the ground level of the house. The porch is the only element of the exterior detailed in wood.

In contrast to the medieval massiveness of the exterior, the interior styling is decidedly Arts and Crafts, with medieval overtures subtly injected only as accents for the distinctive woodwork and furniture. Throughout the house the custom woodwork, built-in furnishings, lighting fixtures, and finishes reflect the functional honesty and use of natural materials popularized by Gustave Stickley. The principal floor is arranged with a double file of public rooms, with the large great room on the north side balanced by the dining room, an antechamber used as the cocktail room, and the study. A massive stone fireplace on the west wall dominates the great room, which has a beamed ceiling and an open balcony which serves as the hall connecting the second-level bedrooms along the north and east walls (photograph 3). Glazed double-leaf doors on the south and west permit access to the verandahs. The dining room, located on the river front of the house, terminates on the south end in a conservatory with a concrete floor, built-in stone planters, and small-light casement windows (photograph 4). The stone fireplace centered on the east wall is (continued)

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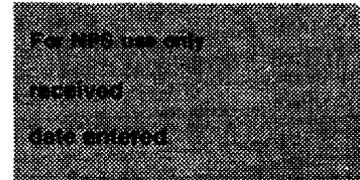
Location of Legal Description

East Haddam Town Clerk  
East Haddam Town Office Building  
East Haddam, Connecticut

Lyme Land Records  
Town Hall  
Route 156  
Lyme, Connecticut

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DEP Cultural Resource Survey  
1985      x state  
Connecticut Historical Commission  
59 S. Prospect St.  
Hartford, CT 06106

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topped with a handsome Craftsman style overmantel piece and sconces operated by a large wooden toggle switch centered on the mantel shelf. The toggle switches are used throughout the house and are representative of the eccentric woodwork that accents every room. A Craftsman style lighting fixture is centered on the beamed ceiling. The walls are finished with patterned squares of woven heavy-gauge hemp matting, as are the other principal-level rooms, and the floors are covered with wood-grain pattern sheet linoleum. The dining room is minimally furnished with a handsome built-in sideboard and a trestle table that slides out from the wall on a fixed track.

The antechamber between the dining room and the study features the most distinctive woodwork in the house. Massive adzed southern white oak boards are used for the baseboard, chair rail, frieze, and architraves. The beamed ceiling is set with bosses which are repeated on the built-in wall cabinet. The flush doors are set with oversized latches and mock strap hinges done in wood, exaggerating the function of the particular elements (photograph 5). The study repeats the Craftsman detailing of the dining room with a beamed ceiling and Mission-style lighting fixtures. Centered in the room is a large wooden desk with conveniences such as a swing telephone podium and an elevated writing stand and a sliding chair on a fixed track (photograph 6).

The kitchen, pantry, and other service rooms are located to the east of the dining room and survive with their original detailing, including sinks, cabinets, and a large copper water tank in the kitchen.

The second-level bedchambers are small and repeat the use of Craftsman detailing and handsome built-in furnishings. The third level of the northwest tower is a large open art gallery set with a handsome beamed ceiling and distinctive oversized wooden brackets for mounting the pictures (photograph 7) and a guest apartment with an interconnecting bedroom, sitting room, and bath. The fourth level is a small multi-windowed observation chamber. The northeast tower is divided into servants' rooms.

Crisscrossing the wooded estate is the approximately three-mile-long right-of-way of the 15" narrow gauge miniature railroad developed by the owner after 1920. Although the rolling stock and the track have been removed, many of the original wooden trestles, turnouts, stone retaining walls, and tunnels associated with the line survive (photograph 8), as does the small rectangular "round house" of concrete and the elaborate passenger station located northwest of the (continued)

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castle. Designed in the same fanciful, picturesque mode as the house, the open stone structure has a one-story hip-roofed ell with massive stone piers and curious rock finials to the south and a two-story tower with open clerestory windows on the southern end (photograph 9).

Elsewhere on the estate, the numerous foot paths and drives are lined with stone walls. Other outbuildings built or utilized by William Gillette include a stone faced root cellar set into the hill northeast of the house; a modest two-story gable-ended vernacular dwelling, used as a residence by his servant, located at the base of the bluff at the northeast corner of the property; a small period barn converted to a comfort facility; and two modern structures a stone comfort facility and a frame gambrel-roofed barn-like structure used as an administration building built by the State of Connecticut in 1957. The two newer structures are non-contributing.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

**Specific dates** 1914-1919 **Builder/Architect** Porteus-Walker Co./William Gillette

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Seventh Sister is the picturesque fieldstone castle designed and built between 1914 and 1919 by William Hooker Gillette (1853-1937), one of the foremost actors and playwrights of his day. Gillette is noted as America's first actor in the natural style, popularizing the speaking of lines rather than the traditional practice of declaiming them (criterion B). Very much the product of the man, the distinctive house reflects not only Gillette's theatrical bent, his love of the unexpected as demonstrated by his choice of the bizarre romantic styling of his house, and his mechanical interests, but also his highly developed appreciation of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic philosophy. Much of the interior detailing, complete with functional built-in furniture and ingenious oversized wooden latches and switches, was designed by Gillette and fabricated with his supervision. The house was erected by the Porteus-Walker Company, which was one of Hartford's leading contracting and woodworking firms between 1884 and 1938. Beyond its significance as the well-preserved estate of an important personage of the stage, Seventh Sister survives as a remarkably complete and highly personal statement of the Craftsman style popularized around the turn of the century by Gustave Stickley (criterion C).

William Hooker Gillette grew up in Hartford in the literary neighborhood known as Nook Farm. Developed by his father, former U.S. senator and abolitionist Francis Gillette, and his uncle John Hooker, Nook Farm boasted such residents as Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Dudley Warner. After graduating in 1873, from public high school, where he excelled in public speaking, Gillette opted to forego college and pursue a career in the theater. He left Hartford and apprenticed himself to several traveling theater companies in the South and West. While his ability and fame as a matinee idol increased during the mid-1870s, Gillette's real desire was to write, direct, and act in his own plays. His first such effort, The Professor, met with immediate success in 1880, and was followed by more than 20 popular melodramas written by Gillette before he retired from the stage in 1913. While his playwriting and producing provided him with financial and critical success, it is for his natural portrayal of Sherlock Holmes that Gillette is best known. So memorable was Gillette's portrayal of Holmes that the literary character became identified with the appearance of the actor who portrayed him on stage over 1,300 times between 1899 and 1929. It was Gillette, not Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who popularized the well-known Holmes accouterments of the deerstalker cap, Inverness cape, and calabash pipe. Gillette was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1913, and was one of the few actors of his day so honored. (Continued)

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Cook, Doris. Sherlock Holmes And Much More. Hartford. The Connecticut Historical Society, 1970.

See Continuation Sheet

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 122 Acres

Quadrangle name Deep River

Quadrangle scale 1: 24,000

UTM References

A 

18	7	14	8	70	45	8	8	40	0
Zone	Easting			Northing					

B 

18	7	15	0	3	0	45	8	8	46	0
Zone	Easting			Northing						

C 

18	7	14	9	60	45	8	8	56	0
Zone	Easting			Northing					

D 

18	7	15	0	60	45	8	8	69	0
Zone	Easting			Northing					

E 

18	7	14	9	00	45	8	8	9	00
Zone	Easting			Northing					

F 

18	7	15	0	45	45	8	8	05	0
Zone	Easting			Northing					

G 

18	7	15	2	10	4	9	8	90	3	0
Zone	Easting			Northing						

H 

18	7	15	1	60	4	5	8	9	3	4	0
Zone	Easting			Northing							

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state N/A code county code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Mary E. McCahon, Consultant, edited by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

organization Connecticut Historical Commission date January, 1986

street & number 59 S. Prospect Street telephone (203) 566-3005

city or town Hartford state CT

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title Director, Connecticut Historical Commission

date June 24, 1986

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

for Helores Byer  
Keeper of the National Register

date 7-31-86

Attest:

Chief of Registration

date

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In 1913, Gillette reduced his involvement with the theater and began developing his retirement estate which he named Seventh Sister because it is situated atop the seventh hill south of Middletown. Located on a rugged bluff overlooking the Connecticut River, the site was discovered by Gillette while cruising the river in his luxurious houseboat Aunt Polly. Under construction for over five years beginning in 1914 from plans and specifications developed by Gillette and refined by his builder, Frank Porteus, Seventh Sister, with its unusual styling, eccentric custom woodwork, ingenious built-in features, and wooden mechanical devices, is a highly personal statement of the interests and stylistic preferences of the owner. While the exterior is a calculated sham ruin, the interior, in marked contrast, reflects the functional honesty of the Craftsman aesthetic popularized by Gustave Stickley. All the custom woodwork, which represents the finest craftsmanship of the period, and the pieces of built-in furniture, such as the sliding dining room table, study desk, bookcases, and dressers and cupboards, were designed by Gillette to be utilitarian, efficient, and attractive with the design based on the function of the piece. The same expressed functionalism was applied to his ingenious designs for oversized wooden light switches, door latches, and window closers. The interior, which ranks as one of the finest and most ambitious Craftsman interiors in the state, survives in a complete state of preservation.

Gillette supervised the construction of Seventh Sister from his temporary quarters on the Aunt Polly, moored at the base of the bluff. The house was built by Porteus-Walker Company, a prominent Hartford construction firm founded in 1884 by Gillette's childhood friend Robert Porteus, whose father was the Nook Farm farm manager. Porteus worked Gillette's sketches and concepts for the house into working drawings, and the distinctive custom woodwork and built-in furnishings were made in the Porteus woodworking shop at 13 Forest Street (non-extant) in Hartford. Other buildings constructed by the Porteus-Walker Company before it was dissolved in 1938 include the Hartford Club and Children's Village in Hartford, the Emanuel Synagogue and American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, and many large residences and factories in the greater Hartford area.

With the house habitable about 1920, Gillette directed his mechanical interest towards creating one of the most ambitious narrow-gauge railways of his day. The nearly three-mile-long right-of-way that crisscrosses the estate was laid out with an elaborate system of switches, trestles, bridges, turnouts, and a tunnel. Other facilities of the "Seventh Sister Shoreline," as Gillette called his private railroad, included a main and remote passenger station, a roundhouse, and a repair shop. Although the track and rolling stock, which

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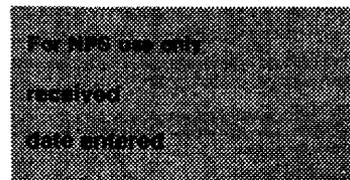
included a steam engine, an electric engine, two pullmans, and an observation car with a capacity of 21, were sold to Lake Compounce, an amusement park in Southington, in 1943, most of the other features survive.

In his will, William Gillette expressed the wish that his executors would exercise discretion in disposing of his estate and not let it pass to "some blithering saphead who had no conception of where he is or with what surrounded."1 Recognizing the historic value of the house because of its association with an important stage personage and its unique architectural style and detailing as well as the natural beauty of the site itself, the State of Connecticut, with the assistance of the private Connecticut Forest and Park Association, purchased the estate from the executors in 1943 for use as a park and museum to Gillette. The house and grounds are maintained by the Department of Environmental Protection Bureau of State Parks and Recreation and opened to the public seasonally. Little has changed since Gillette's death in 1937, save the removal for proper archival reposition of his library and some of the art collection and the sale of the miniature railroad to a private concern.

1. Doris Cook, Sherlock Holmes And Much More (Hartford: The Connecticut Historical Society, 1970), p. 92.

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Dictionary of American Biography Vol. XXII. New York: Charles  
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History of Hartford County Connecticut 1633-1928. Hartford:  
Chicago: The S.J. Clark Publishing Co., 1928.

Porteus, Frank. Interview with Mary E. McCahon. 15 October 1985.

Van Why, Joseph. Nook Farm. Hartford: The Stowe-Day  
Foundation, 1975.

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UTM References: Continued

- I 18/714970/4589210
- J 18/714970/4589460
- K 18/714890/4589500
- L 18/714550/4589260
- M 18/714460/4589080

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property is fully described in the Lyme Land Records, Vol. 59, P. 504-506, and on the attached map: Gillette Castle Park (May, 1966). Scale 1" = 400'.

Boundary Justification:

The nominated acreage is part of the 184-acre state park. The 122 acres included in the nomination are the original tract purchased and developed by William Gillette. The entire holding is nominated because it is traversed by the right-of-way of his railroad and is developed with a series of trails, lookouts, and other landscape features. The State of Connecticut has acquired contiguous acreage as it has become available, increasing Gillette's original holding to 184 acres.