

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

AUG 8 1988

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name John Robbins House
other names/site number Duke of Cumberland Inn

2. Location

street & number 262 Old Main Street
city, town Rocky Hill
state Connecticut code CT county Hartford code 003 zip code 06067

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private (checked), public-local, public-State, public-Federal
Category of Property: building(s) (checked), district, site, structure, object
Number of Resources within Property: Contributing 3, Noncontributing buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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 (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
Signature of certifying official: [Signature]
Date: August 3, 1988
Director, Connecticut Historical Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
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:
[checked] entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
[ ] determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
[ ] determined not eligible for the National Register.
[ ] removed from the National Register.
[ ] other, (explain:)
Signature of the Keeper: [Signature]
Date of Action: 9-20-88

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

AGRICULTURE/agricultural outbuilding

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

DOMESTIC/secondary structure

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Georgian

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation sandstone

walls brick

roof wood shingle

other wood

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**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

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The John Robbins House is a brick Georgian house located on Old Main Street in the north-central section of the town of Rocky Hill. The house stands on a prominent site within a residential neighborhood of single-family houses dating from the mid-18th century to the present. Popularly called the Duke of Cumberland Inn, the Robbins House displays a number of high-style features which retain excellent integrity.

The house is two stories in height with a five-bay facade and gambrel roof (Photograph 1,2). Its exterior brickwork is laid in common bond with fourth-course Flemish variation.(1) Two pair of chimneys rise inside the end walls of the house, and windows are evenly spaced across each elevation, creating a balanced, formal arrangement. A one-story brick ell with a gambrel roof extends to the rear (Photograph 3,4).

The foundation of the house is brownstone blocks with the top course moulded to form a water table. Above it, on the facade, the original paneled double door stands under a row of six transom lights and a large splayed wooden lintel incised with lines to suggest brickwork (Photograph 6). The second floor level is defined by a string course of a single row of stretchers. A Palladian window with original sash and a dentil course appears above the front entrance (Photograph 1). Other windows at the first and second levels have double-hung sash and wide splayed brownstone lintels incised with lines in the shape of bricks. (Photograph 7). Window sash are generally six-over-six panes, 20th-century replacements for original twelve-over-twelve sash, three of which are still extant.

A string course projects at the third-floor and mid-attic levels on each side elevation (Photographs 2,3) A large round attic window pierces each gable end. On the south elevation at the attic level are two wrought-iron insignia, embedded by pins into the mortar, each in the shape of two "C"s back to back. The insignia at left has a bar running across the center marked "1767" (Photograph 17). It is unknown whether this is an original feature.

The wood-shingled roof displays a fluted and modillioned cornice and three front dormers with pediments and dentil courses (Photograph 1). Three shed-roofed dormers at the rear were added in the 20th century (Photograph 5).

Additions to the house on the exterior include a one-story brick garage, probably a carriage house in earlier years, attached to the ell and a one-story enclosed

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porch extending across the rear of the house (Photographs 4,5).

The interior plan of the Robbins House, not including the ell, consists of four rooms on each floor, divided by a narrow central hall, and at the attic level, a full-length ballroom (see plans). Each of the lower eight rooms is about the same size. A stairway rises against the north wall of the hallway and features turned balusters (Photographs 9,10). Wide board flooring is extant throughout the house, but has been covered with narrow oak flooring on the first floor. Windows in the house have deep interior reveals in the 18" thick walls, and have paneled window seats (Photograph 8) Doors throughout the house are paneled and have "HL" hinges.

Six of the eight rooms are embellished with original paneling which is virtually intact (Photographs 8,11-15). The north front room on the second floor has the finest display of paneling in the house (Photograph 14,8). The fireplace wall features a large 75" x 59" panel next to a paneled arched cupboard. This cupboard stands directly above the original location of the corner cupboard on the first floor.

Below, the paneling in the north room on the first floor is slightly more elaborate than that found in other parts of the house, and features a denticulated cornice molding and fluted pilasters (Photograph 11).(2) The glazed corner cupboard stands at the rear of the room (Photograph 12). There is evidence that the cupboard originally stood immediately to the right of the front fireplace and was moved when the room dividing wall was removed in the 20th century. (3)

The paneling around the large kitchen fireplace in the south rear room features several small cabinets. This fireplace also retains a wrought-iron crane, for holding pots, and a brick bake oven. Two other large hearth fireplaces with brick bake ovens are located in the cellar and in the ell (Photograph 16).

Additions to the interior include a central stairway between the second and attic floors and partitions within the attic ballroom, all of which were added circa 1940 then the attic was converted to an apartment. A stairway also was added in the south rear room on the first floor in this century.

The house stands on a 1.61-acre rectangular lot with a street frontage of 209'. At the northeast section of the property there is a small barn with vertical board siding and a wood-shingled gable roof (Photograph 18). Behind it is a shed, circa 1910, composed of stucco-covered rubblestone, with a clapboard addition. Near the southwest corner of the house is an original well, now enclosed.

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End Notes

- (1) Local tradition has it that the brick was made from clay obtained in a nearby pasture.
- (2) Early photographs indicate that the fireplace here once featured a brownstone lintel decorated with an urn and swag carvings. It is no longer extant.
- (3) Inspection of moldings reveals where they were cut and pieced together when the cupboard was moved. Early photographs also show the cupboard at this location (see Kelly, Plate XLI).

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

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

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1767-1910  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1767  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder

unknown  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The John Robbins house is one of the finest examples of brick Georgian architecture in Connecticut. The house displays a high level of architectural integrity and is noteworthy for a number of design features not commonly found in Connecticut buildings of its period. It is also significant for the extent and quality of original interior paneled woodwork found throughout its rooms.

Architecture

The Robbins House has been widely noted in books and reports for the quality of its design and for several architectural features considered to be ahead of their time. The latter claim is based on the 1767 date of construction commonly attributed to the house. The accuracy of this date has been a subject of controversy among architectural historians for some time. Primary sources are unclear on the point, and to this day the date of construction has never been fully determined.

Land records show that John Robbins, grandfather of the house's builder, acquired land in the southern section of Wethersfield in 1638, two years after the founding of the settlement. This southern section of the town was split off and incorporated into the town of Rocky Hill in 1843. According to local traditions and Robbins descendants, this land, acquired from the Duke of Cumberland, consisted of 2000 acres stretching down to the Connecticut River. Captain John Robbins is believed by these sources to have built the house in 1767, and operated it as a tavern, called the "Duke of Cumberland Inn" during the 1770s and 1780s. An original sign from the tavern, dated 1773, is in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society. Architectural historian Elmer Keith, supervisor of the statewide architectural survey by the Works Projects Administration in the 1930s, wrote in 1948 that the sign may, in fact, have belonged to another house owned by Robbins before the construction of the brick house, which he believed may have been constructed circa 1790.(1) If that were true, Robbins would have been 74 years of age at the time of the house's construction.

If the 1767 date is correct, the Robbins House is the first known house in Connecticut to have a Palladian window. Other details, such as the delicate detailing along the cornice, the round attic windows, the splayed incised window

See continuation sheet

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lintels, and the interior window seats, are among the first to be found in the state, and are more commonly found in Connecticut houses after the Revolution. It may also be one of the first houses in the state built of native brick.(2)

Regardless of whether the house was built in 1767 or two decades later, its design and features are of a high quality and are well-preserved. One of its most impressive features is the interior woodwork, which graces every room on the first two floors in the form of paneled fireplaces, wainscoting, window trim, and/or cornice moldings. The cupboards in the north rooms on the first and second floors show a degree of refinement in design advanced for their time, and their location next to the fireplaces is unusual, as is the location of a cupboard in an upper room (Photographs 12,14).(3)

Another unusual feature of the house is the large splayed wooden lintel above the front entrance (Photograph 6). Its color and incised brickwork pattern make it appear to be of the same brownstone as the window lintels. Wood may have been chosen for the lightness of the material, as the weight of a brownstone lintel of the same size might have exceeded the support capacity of the transom below. The house also is notable for its three large hearth fireplaces: one in the cellar, one in the ell, and one in the south rear room on the first floor.

The overall form of the house is similar to wooden mansions of the Connecticut River valley built before the Revolution, and its design, no doubt, was influenced by them. Even the brick string courses are reminiscent of the overhangs of clapboard houses of the period (Photograph 2). The overall character of the house is clearly high-style Georgian, as evidenced by its formal symmetry, paired side chimneys, heavy massing, high gambrel roof with dormer windows, and the style and extent of its interior paneling and cupboards. These features lend credence to the 1767 date of construction.

The features of the house usually associated with the Federal style, such as the Palladian and lunette windows, remain curious anomalies. Whether or not it was the first Connecticut house to display such features, the Robbins House is exceptional for its total composition of architectural elements and its brick construction, which give it a singular character and a position of prominence among houses of its period.

Historical Note

Farmer, merchant, justice of the peace, licensed tavern keeper, and a representative of Wethersfield in the General Assembly between 1780 and 1789, Captain John Robbins (1716-1798) was known for his forceful character and oratorical powers. He married three times, had a number of children, and is known to have kept several slaves. A local historian remarked that Robbins was rated

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by some of the best financial men of his day as probably the wealthiest man in the state.(4) He earned the title of "Captain" from service during the Revolutionary War.

The Robbins House remained in the Robbins family until 1914.

End Notes

(1) Letter from Elmer D. Keith to Mrs. Agnes Howe Terry of the Connecticut Society of Colonial Dames dated February 16, 1948. In archives of the Connecticut State Library.

(2) See Knowlton Mixer, Old Houses of New England (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1927), p. 322. Mixer states that the Robbins Houses is built of the first native brick produced in Connecticut, although no evidence is given for the claim.

(3) J. Frederick Kelly notes in Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut, p. 167, that the corner cupboard belongs exclusively to the central-chimney house, obviously not the case here. A photograph of the Robbins House cupboard appears four pages later.

(4) Henry R. Stiles, The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut, Vol II (New York: The Grafton Press, 1904), p. 556.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Adams, Sherman W. The Maritime History of Wethersfield, Vol. I.  
Wethersfield: Wethersfield Historical Society, 1977.

Connecticut Society of Colonial Dames of America. Connecticut Colonial Houses: Robbins House, Rocky Hill 1767. Notebook of historical and technical information completed by Philemon Wadsworth Robbins, 1913. In archives collection of Connecticut State Library.

Coote, Richard. "Stepping Back Two Centuries Into History." The Hartford Times, 8 February 1963, p. 25.

Darbee, Herbert. Connecticut Historical Commission Inventory form (State Register of Historic Places), Duke of Cumberland Inn, 1968. In records of Connecticut Historical Commission.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A  
 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:  
Connecticut State Library

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property 1.61 acres

UTM References

A 

1	8	6	9	5	4	9	0	4	6	1	6	9	5	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The nominated property is described in the land records of the Town of Rocky Hill, Vol. 114, page 882.

See continuation sheet

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary encompasses the full parcel of land containing the John Robbins House and surrounding land. The house originally stood on 2000 acres. However, most of this land has been sold and subdivided and has lost historic integrity. The parcel on which the house now stands contributes the historic integrity of the resource.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Janice L. Elliott and David F. Ransom, Consultants  
organization Connecticut Historical Commission date January 31, 1988  
street & number 56 S. Prospect Street telephone 566-3005  
city or town Hartford state CT zip code 06106

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Kelly, J. Frederick. Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut. New  
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Kuckro, Anne Crofoot. Capt. James Francis, Master Builder: Brick  
Architecture in Wethersfield Before 1840. Wethersfield: Wethersfield  
Historical Society, 1974.

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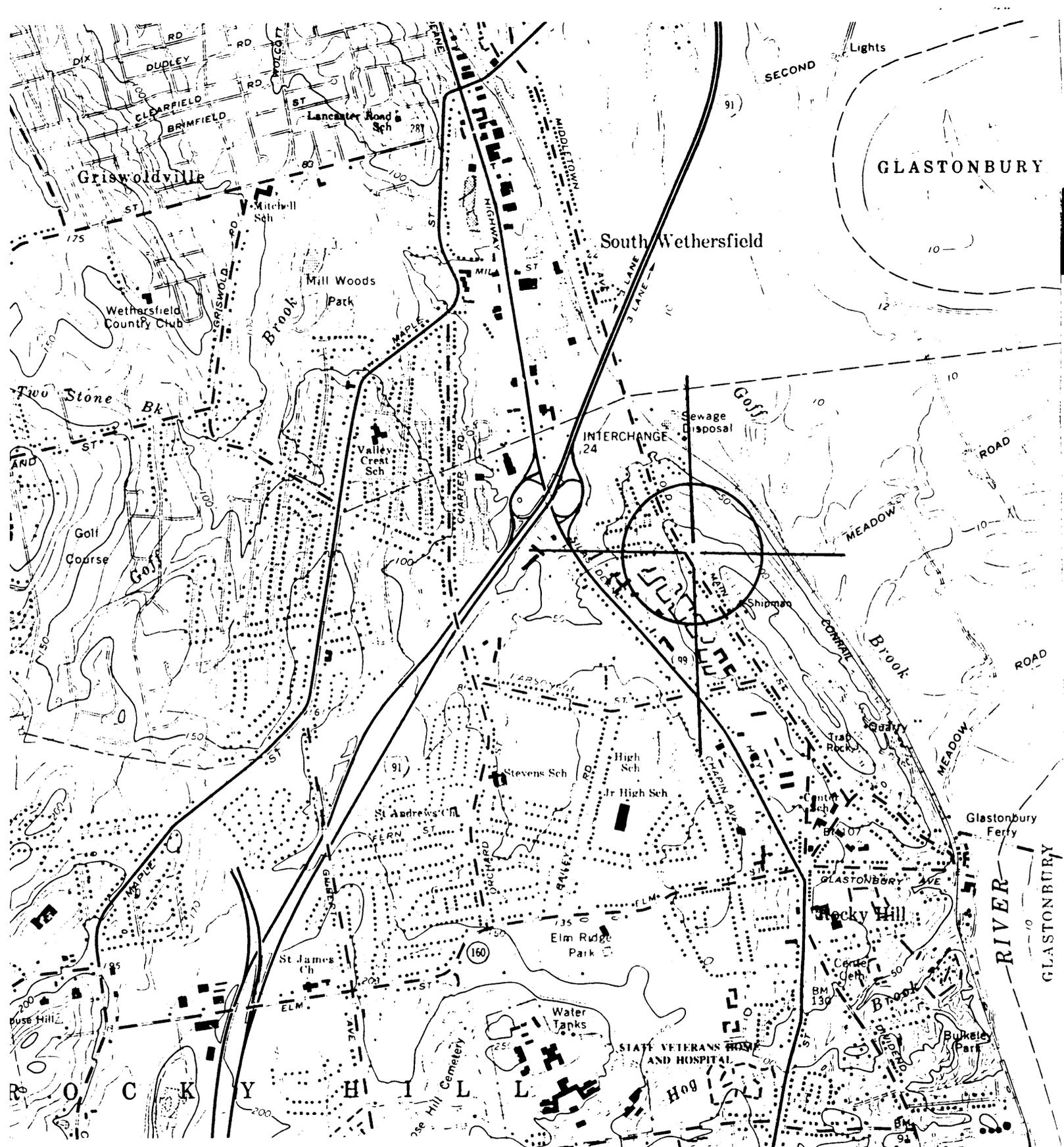
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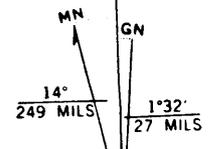
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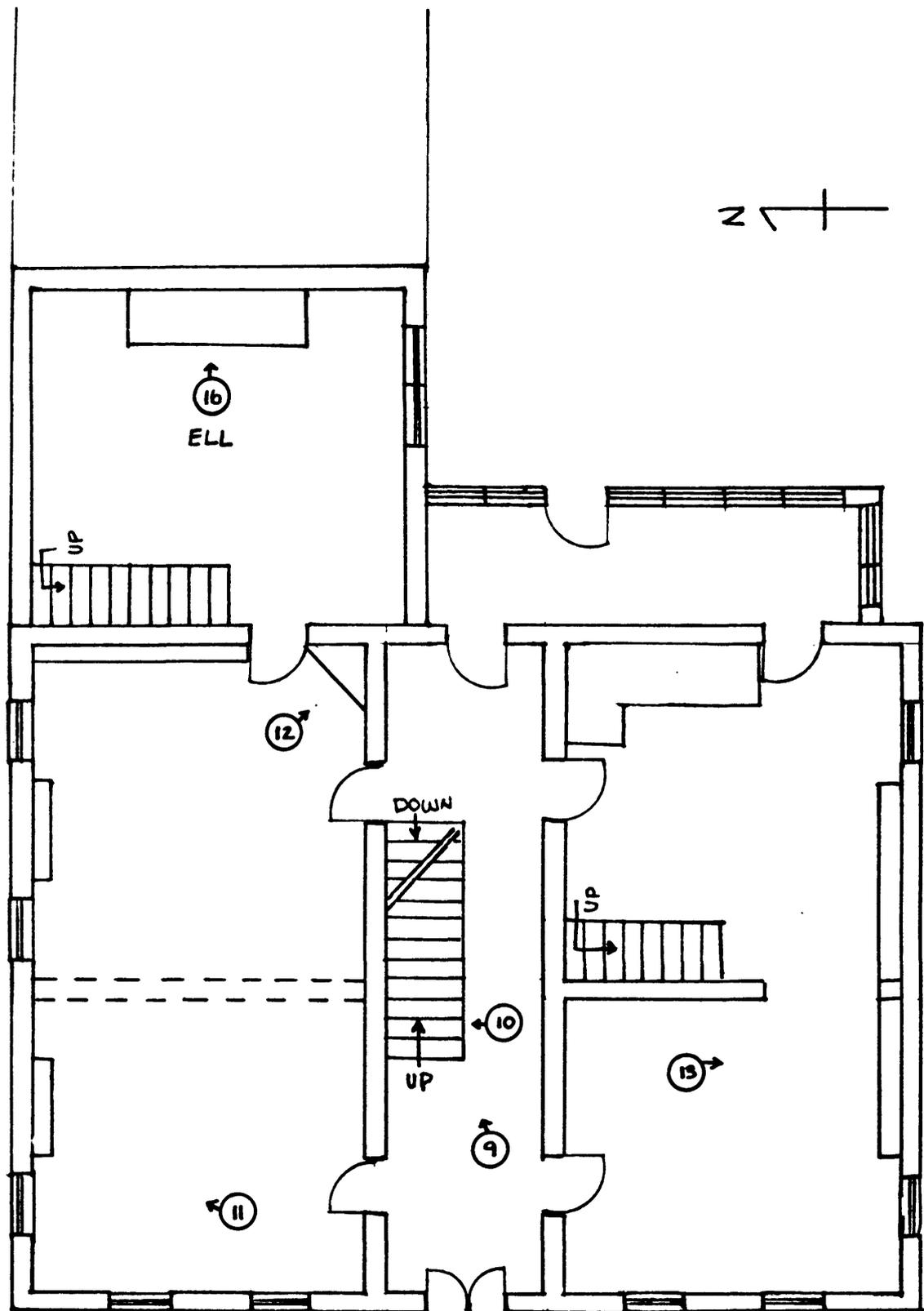


JOHN ROBBINS HOUSE  
 Rocky Hill, Connecticut

USGS Map - HARTFORD SOUTH, CONN.  
 Scale 1:24,000



UTM GRID AND 1984 MAGNETIC NORTH DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET

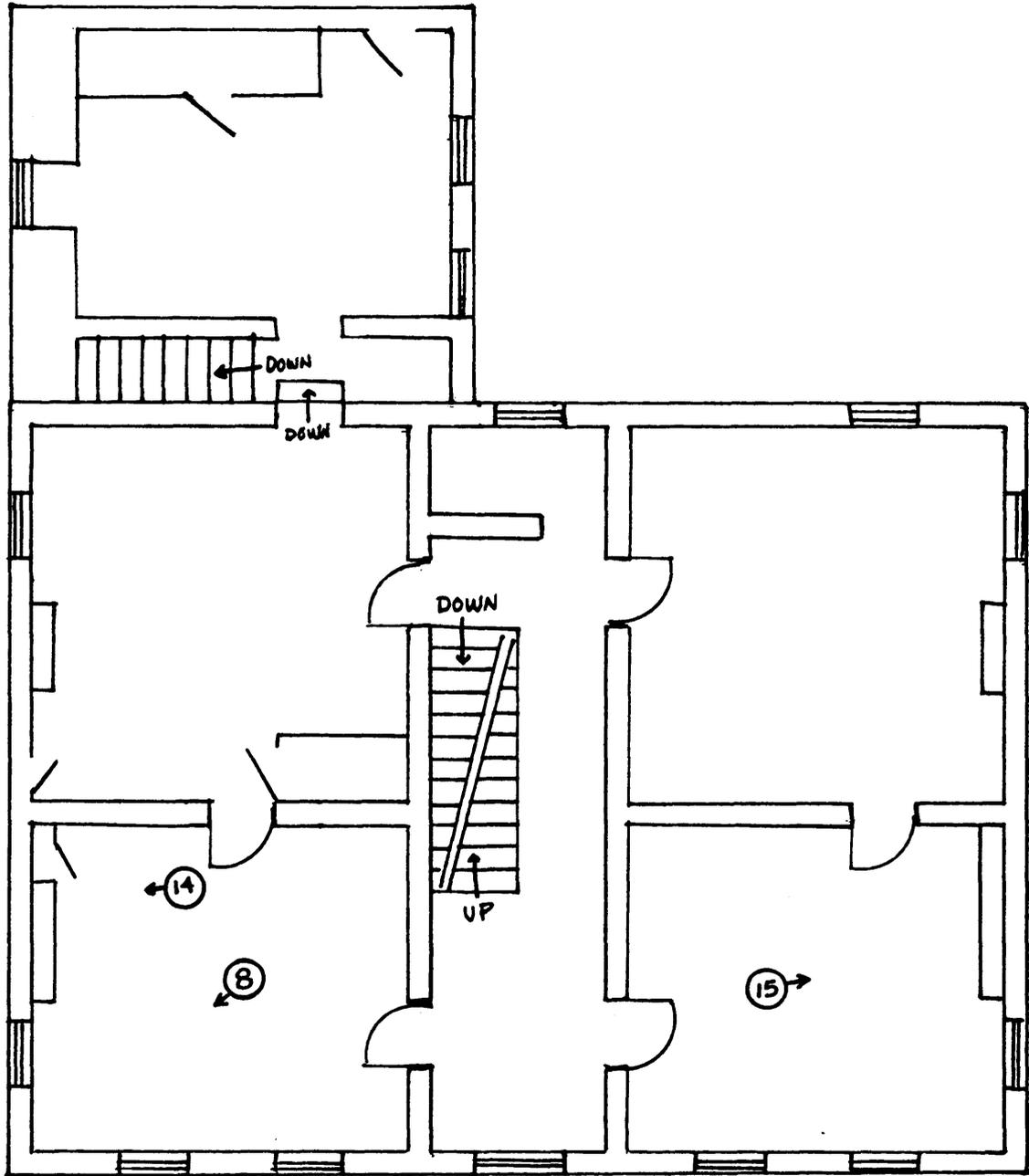
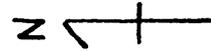


JOHN ROBBINS HOUSE  
 Rocky Hill, Connecticut

FIRST FLOOR PLAN  
 (not to scale) 1" = approx. 8'

Photo Key: ♂

J. Elliott



JOHN ROBBINS HOUSE  
Rocky Hill, Connecticut

SECOND FLOOR PLAN  
(not to scale) 1" = approx. 8'

JLElliot

Photo Key:

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Rocky Hill, ConnecticutSection number Photos Page 1Photographs

All photographs are of the John Robbins House and property, 262 Main Street, Rocky Hill, Connecticut, and were taken by Janice L. Elliott in January, 1988, unless otherwise noted. Negatives for all photographs are on file with the Connecticut Historical Commission.

<u>Photo Number</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>View</u>
1	West facade	East
2	West and South elevations	Northeast
3	North and West elevations	Southeast
4	North and East elevations	Southwest
5	East and South elevations	Northwest
6	Front door	East
7	Detail, window lintel	North
8	Interior, north front room, second floor	Northwest
9	Interior, main stairway	Northeast
10	Interior, detail, main stairway	North
11	Interior, north front room, first floor	Northeast
12	Interior, detail, corner cupboard, first floor	Southeast
13	Interior, south front room, first floor	South
14	Interior, north front room, second floor	North
15	Interior, south front room, second floor Note original 12-over-12 window at right.	South
16	Interior, first floor, ell	East
17	South elevation, detail, wrought iron insignia	North
18	Barn	Northeast