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OMB No. 1024-0018

NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 8-86)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

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1. Name of Property

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historic name: REVEREND JOHN ELY HOUSE

other name/site number: N/A

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2. Location

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street & number: 54 Milwaukee Avenue

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city/town: Bethel not for publication: N/A
vicinity: N/A

state: CT county: Fairfield code: 001 zip code: 06801

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3. Classification

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Ownership of Property: private

Category of Property: building

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: _____

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. See cont. sheet.

Signature of certifying official: John W. Shannahan, Director, Connecticut Historical Commission. Date: March 15, 2001. State or Federal agency and bureau.

In my opinion, the property meets 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:

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

Edson H. Beall 4/25/01

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic: DOMESTIC Sub: single dwelling
Current: DOMESTIC Sub: single dwelling

9. Major Bibliographical References

X See continuation sheet.

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:

- X State historic preservation office Connecticut Historical Commission
- Other state agency 59 South Prospect Street
- Federal agency Hartford, Connecticut 06106
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: approx. .8 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

A	18	633500	4581390	B	_____	_____	_____
C	_____	_____	_____	D	_____	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: See continuation sheet.
 The boundary includes the entire parcel known as 54 Milwaukee Avenue, recorded in the Town of Bethel assessor records as Map 39, Block 64, Lot 40.

Boundary Justification: See continuation sheet.
 The boundary includes the entire parcel currently associated with the house; surrounding uses, predominantly modern residential development, form a distinct visual break.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: Bruce Clouette, reviewed by John Herzan, Connecticut Historical Commission

Organization: Public Archaeology Survey Team Date: September 30, 2000

Street & Number: P.O. Box 209 Telephone: 860-429-1723

City or Town: Storrs State: CT Zip: 06268

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Reverend John Ely House
Bethel, Fairfield County, CT**

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The Reverend John Ely House in Bethel, Connecticut, is a 2 1/2-story clapboarded dwelling built in 1792 (Photograph 1). The ridge of its gable roof is set parallel to the road, with the main entry centered on its five-bay south facade. A large stone chimney rises from the center of the wood-shingled roof. The original house measures approximately 24' by 36' in plan and is set upon a fieldstone foundation. Later additions include a small gabled ell extending from the northeast corner, a one-story pitched-roof extension across the remainder of the north (rear) elevation, and an 11' by 16' enclosed porch appended to the east side, probably added c.1900 (Photograph 2). The house is elevated on a slight knoll above the level of Milwaukee Avenue and is surrounded by tall mature shade trees. Most of the other residences in this moderately built-up neighborhood are of modern construction.

The main entry (Photograph 3) has double paneled doors (probably mid-19th-century in origin), a six-light transom, and wooden storm doors. It is sheltered by a Federal-style portico featuring slender Tuscan columns, an open soffit, and triglyphs and modillions embellishing the cornice. The portico appears to be a mixture of historic and later materials blended together in a way that seems somewhat too wide for the doorway. The date plaque next to the entry reflects an earlier understanding of the house's age. Windows have plain board surrounds and generally are fitted with six-over-six sash (probably dating from c.1840); those on the second story rear elevation have twelve-over-eight sash that appears to be original. The two windows for the attic story in each end gable are smaller than the others; these probably were substituted early in the 19th century for a single window in each gable, as evidenced by the removal of diagonal bracing to accommodate the two windows.

The interior is arranged around the central chimney in the traditional plan: two large front rooms, with a kitchen and two smaller rooms at the back; currently, the east rear room is continuous with the kitchen, and the west rear room has been opened up to the front room. There is a small stair hall immediately within the front entry, and a second set of stairs at the northeast rear corner. The kitchen has a large brick cooking fireplace with an oven set off to the left side, covered by a wooden door. The opening has a plain surround and shelf.

The cellar is undivided but apparently was used at one time as living space because there is a large stone cooking fireplace with a huge timber lintel and a brick bake oven set into the back wall (Photographs 4 and 5). The base of the chimney also provides several niches, one of which retains an old if not original wooden batten door (Photograph 6),

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and one which served as an ash collector for the first-floor fireplaces.

The front-room fireplaces are set along short diagonal walls at the inner corners (Photograph 7). The openings are formed from cut-stone cheeks and lintels and have simple surrounds and mantelshelves. Most of the interior walls are plastered or formed from gypsum wallboard, but the front-room fireplace walls are finished with vertical tongue-and-groove wide pine boards. Although these and the shelf are made from hand-planed boards, this wall and mantel appear to be a modern installation using old material. Second-floor fireplaces, in the east and kitchen chambers, consist of small openings with no woodwork finish, only parging of the masonry.

Notable interior details that represent original fabric include wide-board hard-pine floors on the second level, raised-panel interior doors on the first floor and batten doors on the second, and a number of small cupboards with simple board doors set into the walls adjacent to the chimney. The woodwork in the front stair hall is the most nearly original and complete of any room and includes cased posts, raised paneled walls, period railing with simple square balusters and slender handrail, and sawn scrollwork applied to the sides of the stairs (Photograph 8).

The attic is unfinished but accommodates a large smoke chamber attached to the north side of the chimney (Photograph 9). The smoke chamber is built with boards forming the walls and ceiling and it is lathed and plastered on the inside. Several iron hooks remain in the interior of the chamber.

One alteration that is probably not appropriate to the period of the house is the exposure of the joists and beams in the west front room and kitchen and many of the posts throughout the house. Lath marks indicate that the plaster ceilings were originally attached to the undersides of the joists, concealing them from view, and nail holes (as well as the survival of intact examples) indicate that the posts were originally cased. This modification has the advantage, however, of exposing some of the framing on the inside, including the short diagonal girt that carries the joists above the fireplace walls (Photograph 7). Other visible framing details include relatively slender straight corner posts, the use of continuous joists rather than having summers for support in the middle of the room, the bracing of the common-rafter roof with midpoint purlins connected by crossties (Photograph 9), and the absence of overhangs on the exterior, which

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indicates a lack of offset connections at the juncture of the corner posts, plates, and girts.

In addition to the house, the nominated property includes a small post-and-beam framed, board-sided barn (Photograph 10) measuring approximately 22' by 42' in plan. The barn has been altered with the addition of cupolas, window boxes, and a lean-to across the back, but it retains its 19th-century character in its form and exterior material and therefore is counted as a contributing building.

The author of this registration-nomination form had the advantage of a lengthy walk-through of the house undertaken by noted architectural historian John Obed Curtis on May 27, 1999. His observations, as well as the questions asked by the owners, Jeffrey and Maryann Mutherspaugh, were of great assistance. The walk-through was recorded on videotape that is now in the owners' possession.

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Reverend John Ely House
Bethel, Fairfield County, CT**

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Summary

The Reverend John Ely House has local historical significance because it was owned in succession by several individuals who made substantial contributions to the settlement history of Bethel, which evolved from an outlying farming area within the 18th-century town of Danbury to an industrial and commercial center that became a separate town in 1855 (Criterion A). The house's first owner, John Ely, was the community's second Congregational minister, one who sustained Bethel's identity as a church society at a crucial point, when some members wanted to rejoin Danbury. Ely was followed by Samuel Sturges, the third minister; Eli Taylor and Sherman Ferry, early entrepreneurs in hat manufacturing, the industry that led to Bethel's expansion in the early 19th century; and Oliver Shepard, another manufacturer who was instrumental in establishing Bethel as a separate town.

The Reverend John Ely House also has architectural significance as a good example of the domestic architecture of late 18th-century Connecticut (Criterion C). Although it has been altered over time, including some "re-colonializing" in the 20th century, the house retains its characteristic form, with a large center chimney, broad side to the road orientation, and five-bay facade. Its exterior materials, wood shingles and clapboards represent replacements-in-kind that are proper to a house of the period. The house's structural system, utilizing relatively light timbers and less complex framing methods, is also typical of the period. Finally, the house is particularly notable for the complexity of its well-preserved stone chimney and related components. Storage niches, ash pits, a variety of fireplace types and bake ovens, and smoke chambers are all characteristic of 18th-century New England houses, but it is unusual to find all of these elements in place in a single house.

Historic Context

Bethel was formerly an outlying part of Danbury, characterized by scattered family farms and the small-scale industries that served the agricultural economy. Sufficient numbers had settled in the area by 1759 that a separate parish could be organized. By forming an ecclesiastical society, the residents of Bethel, as it was named, did more than simply unite for religious observances. According to colony law, every town or church society was required to support at least one public school, and since taxes were collected for minister and school support on a parish basis, other functions followed, including highway maintenance and militia training, which also usually were organized by

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areas that were co-terminus with church-society boundaries. Some towns also rotated public offices, particularly those of selectman and representative to the colonial legislature, among the various parishes that made up the town. Thus, Bethel's establishment as a Congregational Church society was an important step in establishing its identity as a social and political entity as well as a religious one.

Because he played a role in supervising the schools and in commenting on public issues at the town meeting and in election-day sermons, the Congregational minister had influence and status within the community that went even beyond his considerable importance as a spiritual leader and counselor. Bethel's first minister was Noah Wetmore, who was called in 1760 and stayed for 24 years. Following his death, the parish underwent seven years of turmoil in trying to find a successor; some members wanted to disband the parish and return to the church in Danbury center. Finally, John Ely (1763-1827) of Lyme, Connecticut, accepted a call in 1791 and was ordained on November 13 of that year. Ely was from a family of Congregational ministers and studied with his uncle, the Reverend Richard Ely, before attending Yale College, from which he graduated in 1786.

Ely sustained the church in Bethel for ten years before being led astray by poor judgement. In 1802 he attempted to correct what he saw as failings in certain parishioners by writing anonymous letters criticizing their behavior. He was found out, and the church dismissed him in 1804. He had better fortune in his subsequent parishes, fathered eleven children, and had two of his sermons published before dying in a wagon accident.

John Ely purchased the property on which the house was built in 1792. Although sometimes referred to as such, it was not a parsonage in the modern sense but rather property owned by the minister in his own name. It is possible that the congregation provided some assistance to Ely, since when he was dismissed it was bought by his successor, but after that it was no longer associated with the church or its ministers.

Samuel Sturges (1767-1835) graduated from Yale the year after Ely. He had preached in Bethel in 1790 and had been offered the position of minister, but declined. Following Ely's dismissal, Sturges accepted the call in 1806. His was a successful ministry during which church attendance increased. In 1811, however, the congregation was forced to let Sturges go because it could no longer afford to maintain a minister. Sturges continued to reside in Bethel, guiding the church by serving as the society's clerk until he retired to his family's farm in Greens Farms, Fairfield, Connecticut, in 1817.

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The next two owners, Captain Eli Terry and then Sherman Ferry, were hatters by trade, early entrepreneurs in developing an industry that soon made the Danbury-Bethel area the center of hat-making for the entire country. Deeds in the period 1826 to 1836 mention not only agricultural outbuildings such as a barn and hoghouse but also a hatter's shop on the property. From 1836 to 1876, the house was the home of the Oliver Shepard (1783-1861), another hat manufacturer and an influential citizen in his community. Shepard served as a justice of the peace for many years and also had a term in the state legislature representing Danbury. He was instrumental in the petition drive which led to Bethel's incorporation as a separate town in 1855. By this time the community had grown substantially, with numerous hat shops and other industries, a railroad connection to New York City, and numerous stores, churches, and houses in the center of town. The house on Milwaukee Avenue thus witnessed the evolution of Bethel from a small outlying and predominantly agricultural parish in the 18th century to a bustling industrial and commercial center in the 19th century, a transformation in which the owners of the house played important roles.

Architectural Significance

The Reverend John Ely House embodies the distinguishing characteristics of one of the most common types of houses from 18th-century New England, the five-bay, center-chimney gable-roofed house. Although New Englanders are now known to have lived in many different kinds of dwellings, the type had its roots in the early days of English settlement and persisted, with more up-to-date stylistic features, well into the 19th century.

Despite undergoing changes over the years, the Ely House continues to exhibit the major hallmarks of the type. In addition to its basic form and prominent central chimney, the house has the clapboard exterior and wood-shingled roof that are appropriate to the period. Although the six-over-six windows are somewhat later, c. 1840, they produce a visual effect similar to that of the divided-light sash of the 18th century, which used a smaller sized pane (as seen in the original sash preserved in place in the house's second-story rear windows). The interior plan, ranged around the central chimney stack and its fireplaces, is largely in place, and the finish in the front stairhall is original and complete. Finally, the house preserves numerous other interior details, such as interior doors, cupboards, and wide-board floors, that are representative of the building practices of the period. Because of its relatively sparse population in the 18th century, as well as the 1777 raid by British troops, which resulted in the destruction by fire of many of the houses in the vicinity, Bethel today has fewer houses in

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the traditional New England vernacular style than most other Connecticut towns.

The Ely House is especially notable because of the completeness and complexity of its chimney stonework. The importance of the chimney for the traditional New England house cannot be overstated. Its fireplaces were the only source of heat throughout the long winter, and the mass of its stonework, once heated up, served as a reservoir of warmth. The chimney provided the means for both the cooking of food for immediate consumption and, through drying and smoking, the preservation of foodstuffs for off-season times of the year.

The Ely House's chimney exhibits numerous features that were common in the period, though few houses today can claim to have as many of them in one place. The two major variants in brick bake ovens, the older practice of placing it in the back wall of the fireplace and the later side oven, can be seen in the house's two cooking fireplaces. The provision of an ash pit in the cellar not only allowed first-floor fireplaces to be more easily cleaned, it collected the wood ashes in one place, where they could be removed for processing into lye or sold. The other niches in the chimney base provided an even temperature where food in stoneware crocks and other containers could be stored. Finally, the smoke chamber in the attic, complete with hooks for hanging meats, represents a once-common feature that survives in relatively few houses today.

As a representative dwelling of the 1790s, the Ely House has architectural interest because several of its features show the movement of the traditional form away from its roots in medieval England. The size of the framing member is relatively light compared with early 18th-century house frames, and the posts are straight, lacking the shoulder or flare that earlier builders thought was necessary. The use of the summer to support the joists at their midpoint has been dropped altogether in favor of continuous joists. The lack of overhangs indicates that a simplified method of connecting the posts, girts, and plates at the corners has been employed in place of the offset joints and full or partial cantilever of horizontal components found in houses built earlier in the 18th century. Lastly, the diagonal fireplaces represent a practice that appears to have become common only at the end of the 18th century. Although such a placement may have projected heat into the room somewhat better than one on a side wall, the practice was probably also a reflection of personal taste for novelty, and perhaps a connotation for stylishness.

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Bibliography

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Photographs

**Reverend John Ely House
Bethel, Fairfield County, CT**

Photographs-1

All photographs:

1. Reverend John Ely House
2. Bethel, Fairfield County, CT
3. PAST, Inc. Photo
4. June, 2000
5. Negative filed with Connecticut Historical Commission
Hartford, CT

Captions:

South (front) and west elevations, camera facing northeast
Photograph 1 of 10

North (rear) and east elevations, camera facing southwest
Photograph 2 of 10

Detail of entrance, south elevation, camera facing northeast
Photograph 3 of 10

Cellar fireplace, camera facing southwest
Photograph 4 of 10

Detail of bake oven, cellar fireplace, camera facing west
Photograph 5 of 10

Detail of batten door covering recess in south wall of chimney stack,
cellar level, camera facing northwest
Photograph 6 of 10

Diagonal fireplace, west front room, first floor, camera facing
northeast
Photograph 7 of 10

Stairway between first and second floors, camera facing northeast
Photograph 8 of 10

Smoke chamber, attic, camera facing west
Photograph 9 of 10

Barn at rear of house, camera facing northeast
Photograph 10 of 10