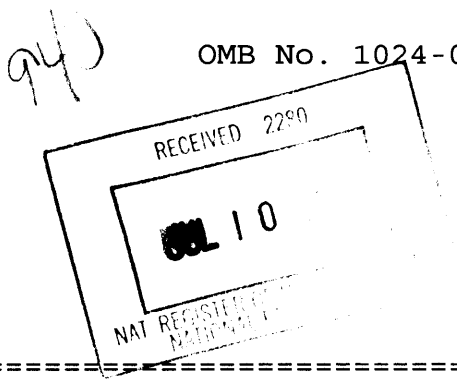


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**



=====

1. Name of Property

=====

historic name: RYE HOUSE

other name/site number: N/A

=====

2. Location

=====

street & number: 122-132 Old Mount Tom Road

city/town: Litchfield

not for publication: N/A
vicinity: N/A

state: CT county: Litchfield

code: 005 zip code: 06419

=====

3. Classification

=====

Ownership of Property: private

Category of Property: district

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>5</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

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: 06/30/00

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):

Signature of Keeper: Nelson H. Beall. Date of Action: 8/10/00

Signature of Keeper: [Signature]. Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic: DOMESTIC Sub: single dwelling

Current: DOMESTIC Sub: single dwelling

=====
7. Description
=====

Architectural Classification:

Tudor Revival
Craftsman

Other Description: N/A_____

Materials: foundation Stone roof Slate
walls Stone other Brick
Stucco Glass

Describe present and historic physical appearance. X See continuation sheet.

=====
8. Statement of Significance
=====

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

Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) : _____

Areas of Significance: ARCHITECTURE
SOCIAL HISTORY

Period(s) of Significance: 1910 - 1939 _____

Significant Dates: 1910 _____

Significant Person(s): _____

Cultural Affiliation: _____

Architect/Builder: Wilson Eyre, architect of house
Warren E. Green, contractor for house
Wilder and White, architects of cottage
F. W. Fuller, contractor for cottage

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above. X See continuation sheet.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

7-1

Rye House, formerly the estate of Isabella Douglass Curtis, is a large Tudor/Elizabethan Revival-style stone and stucco mansion sited on a high rise of ground in the Bantam section of Litchfield, Connecticut (Photograph 1). Dating from 1910-1911, the property also includes a gardener's "cottage" (itself a sizeable dwelling) at the entrance to property, a greenhouse, a water tower on the wooded hillside west of the main house, and the remains of a garden pergola. The nominated property totals some 52 acres; it includes land surrounding the complex that retains its original landscape characteristics, such as the broad open field on the south side of the house facing Old Mount Tom Road and the long drive between the house and cottage (see Sketch Map).

The house is 2 ½ stories in height and measures about 50 by 145 feet in plan, with its long dimension along an east-west axis. The walls were constructed of native fieldstone, visible at the corners where the gray stuccoed exterior stops against rustic quoins. The overall plan is asymmetrical, with two gabled projections and one flat-roofed, parapeted, semi-octagonal-plan projection on the south elevation (Photograph 2) and three 2 1/2-story cross-gable projections on the north elevation (Photograph 3). The roof line is further broken up by two small gable dormers on each main slope of the roof and three stout stuccoed chimneys set at the intersections of the main mass and the gabled projections. Appended to the west end of the house, offset from the main axis, is a 2 1/2-story, jerkinhead-roofed portion that served as the kitchen wing; it has an additional chimney. Roofs are covered with thick gray slates, the courses graduated in width from broad to narrow as they move up toward the ridge.

The main entrances to the house are on the north elevation (Photograph 3). In addition to a flat-roofed, parapeted porte-cochere with Tudor-arched openings, there is a central doorway with glass doors within a shallow gabled entry porch (Photograph 4). Above the Tudor-arched entrance is a stepped dripmold. On this elevation are found two elements that appear to have been medieval architectural antiques incorporated into the 1910 design: a carved limestone lion's-head above the center entrance and a tablet with an as-yet-to-be-deciphered inscription in Roman letters above the west-facing porte-cochere opening. The area north of the house is treated as a sunken paved court, with stairs leading up the hillside north of the house.

The front of the house was conceived to be the south elevation, overlooking the broad open field bounded by Old Forge Hollow Road, Old Mount Tom Road, and the estate's drive. There is a large terrace the width of the house on this side constructed of fieldstone rubble walls, with steps leading down to the field. Centered on this elevation,

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

7-2

between a one-story rectangular-plan bay window on the right and the two-story octagonal-plan projecting bay on the left, are three glazed arched openings creating a sunroom within, with thick engaged columns separating the archways (Photograph 5).

There is considerable variety in the type and arrangement of windows, all of which are fitted with small-pane, divided-light sash with either lead comes or wooden muntins. First-floor openings generally have leaded casement windows, with the second-floor windows more likely to have double-hung wooden sash. The south-elevation projecting bays have groups of tall, narrow windows below nine-light transoms. A few openings are embellished with dripmolds, but most are plain.

The interior plans features large south-facing rooms on the first floor, service rooms at the west end, and, along the north wall, entrance vestibules and the stairway to the second floor. The winding white-marble stairs (Photograph 6) are richly embellished with foliate-carved newel posts and a railing in which bulbous balusters and keystones define a series of arched openings. The dark oak paneling in the dining room (Photograph 7) has fields of flat recessed panels separated by partly fluted pilasters on high pedestals. The white marble fireplace is carved with flowers, vines, and fluting surrounding a shallow pointed-arch opening. A large gilded opalescent-glass lamp is suspended from the center of the traceried plaster ceiling. A similar combination of medieval and Renaissance motifs is found in the large room to the west, originally designated the hall: traceried ceiling, dark-oak paneled wainscot, and a mantel with pilasters, caryatids, raised bosses, a Tudor-arched opening, and floral, spiraling vine, and shield carvings (Photograph 8).

On the second floor are smaller rooms that served as bedrooms for the family and guests, with numerous bathrooms between the chambers. The second floor mantels are oak and generally more in the Arts and Crafts style (Photographs 9 and 10) than those on the first floor. Also Craftsman in inspiration are the paneled interior shutters on the house's casement windows, which have hinges and latches that mimic antique hand-forged hardware (Photograph 11).

The grounds of the estate retain much of the original landscape concept, which favored a random and rustic appearance over formality. The drive leading from Old Mount Tom Road is defined by two rows of oaks and walls of mortared fieldstone rubble, with gateposts at both the south end and at the north end where the drive turns toward the house (Photograph 13). Similar masonry forms the tall piers that support the remnants of a garden pergola west of the house (Photograph

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

7-3

14). Part of the west-terrace garden area has been used for a relatively modern swimming pool, but there remain stone planters, low garden walls, and an architectural fragment in the form of a gargoyle to suggest the garden's original character. There is also a low cruciform rubblestone planter that may originally have been a fountain. Further south is an enclosed grassy area, bounded by a stone wall, which has remnants of the original wooden and iron-strap Craftsman-style gates (Photograph 16).

Outbuildings include a wooden-stave cylindrical water reservoir, held together with a series of turnbuckled iron rods on the hill to the north of the house (Photograph 17); a garden house at the west end of the pergola, measuring 18 feet by 32 feet in plan, with a slate roof, casement windows, and stucco and stone exterior like that of the main house (Photograph 18); a metal-framed greenhouse in disrepair attached to the south end of the foregoing structure; and a two-story stuccoed cottage, 32 feet by 72 feet in overall plan, near the gate to the estate (Photograph 19). Built a year after the main house, the cottage has a slate roof, asymmetrical roof line with a two-story projecting bay and a low sloping dormer; small-pane divided sash; and a small entry porch at the southeast corner formed from a cut-away in the block of the house below the overhanging roof.

Resources in the nominated property were enumerated and classified as follows: the main house, the cottage, and the garden building with attached greenhouse were counted as three contributing buildings; the water reservoir was counted as a contributing structure; the landscaped grounds--gardens, court, terraces, and drive---constitute a contributing site; and a modern concrete-block four-bay garage north of the bend in the drive was counted as a non-contributing building (Photograph 20).

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

7-4



Rye House, as drawn and colored by Wilson Eyre and published in *American Architect*, April 12, 1911. Although the overall spirit of the house is the same as built, including the front terrace and north-side court, some of the elements were shifted around: the polygonal bay was built on the left of the three arches rather than the right, the small gabled roof dormers are closer together, and the west kitchen wing is offset to the south rather than the north.

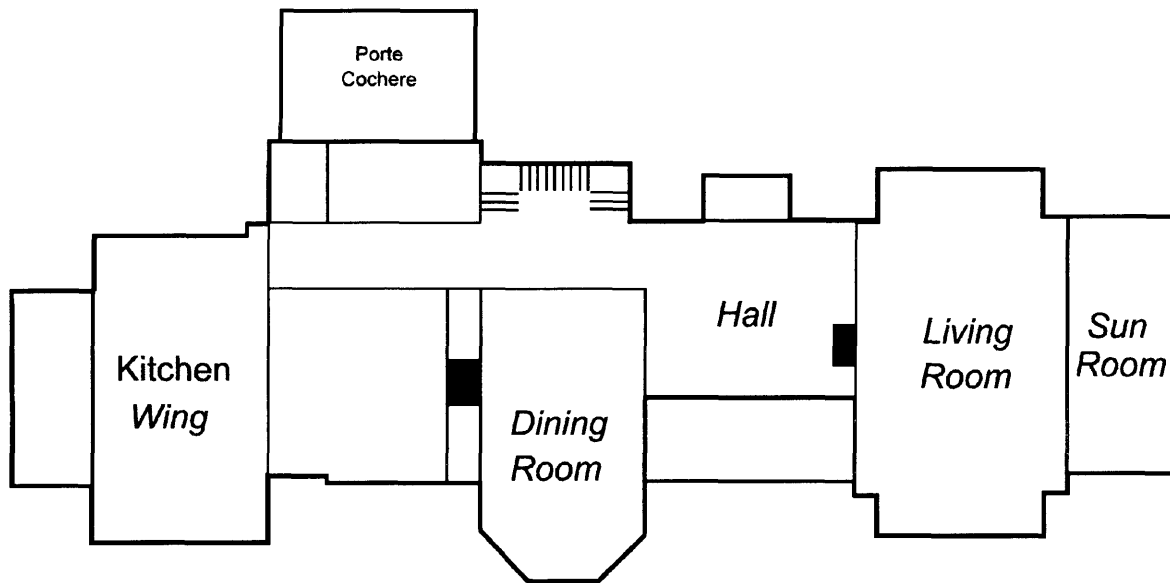
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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Description

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

7-5



First-Floor Plan

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

8-1

Summary

Rye House has both architectural and historical significance. It is a well-preserved example of an early 20th-century American "country house," a type of residence characterized by large size and scale, landscaped grounds, and rich architectural detailing, generally in one of the period's "revival" styles (Criterion C). Rye House was designed by a nationally prominent architect, Wilson Eyre of Philadelphia, and epitomizes his particular approach to the country house in its arrangement of rooms, choice of ornamentation, and setting. Eyre entered sketches of the design in several architectural exhibitions and published them in *American Architect* in 1911. The house also documents an important development in the social history of Connecticut's western hills, the influx of wealthy New York City residents seeking weekend and seasonal homes in the region's rolling countryside (Criterion A). In Litchfield, Sharon, Kent, Cornwall, and other towns, these well-to-do urbanites typically bought large tracts of former farmland and forest and then erected what to them may have seemed modest country retreats but were, by the standards of the surrounding communities, mansions of impressive size and ornateness. The outsiders also added to the complexity of social life in the towns. Although they tended to socialize with their own social class (if at all), they also were neighbors, employers, taxpayers, and, in some cases, benefactors in their adopted communities.

Historic Context

A major theme in the historical development of the Northwest Highlands of Connecticut is the role played by the region as a country retreat for the wealthy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

Many places became popular retreats for business, artistic, and educational elites. From Danbury to Salisbury affluent citizens erected elegant summer homes and substantial rural estates. A range of publications and advertisements touted the lure of the region, particularly its scenic hills and cool lakes. One turn-of-the-century author extolled the "pure kaleidoscopic scenery" and "well-cared-for roads" which made outdoor life "a joy and delight." (Rossano, p. 84).

Litchfield was especially well-suited as a locale for the well-to-do escaping the heat, smog, and clamor of life in New York City. It had the woods, ponds, and elevated ground suitable for country estates, and yet it was reachable by good rail connections to New York and was

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

8-2

reasonably close to Waterbury, Torrington, and other sources of goods and services.

Rye House was built for Isabella Douglass Curtis (1848-1941), the widow of Charles Boyd Curtis, a New York City banker and real-estate developer who had amassed a substantial fortune by the time he died in 1895. The house was a replacement for the Curtises' suburban estate in Rye, New York, which they had maintained in addition to their New York City house. Mrs. Curtis had reportedly become disenchanted with Westchester County and sought a quieter milieu; it is believed that the name of her Litchfield House was chosen to memorialize the earlier estate. In her sixties when it was built, Mrs. Curtis lived at Rye House on a nearly year-round basis, along with the family of her son Ellicott. Ellicott pursued the life of a gentleman farmer, constantly experimenting with progressive but costly schemes and depleting the family's financial resources. Further reverses of fortune during the Depression forced Mrs. Curtis to give up the house and move to England to live out her years with a daughter.

The social standing and wealth of the Curtises are reflected in Rye House's size, substantial masonry construction, and extensive architectural embellishment. The Tudor Revival-style outbuildings, the gateposts and drive, and the extensive acreage remaining with the house (still only a fraction of the hundreds of acres originally owned by Mrs. Curtis and her son) also contribute to the ambience of wealth and privilege appropriate to a country estate of the period. The total expenditure for the main house was estimated at \$80,000, equivalent to several million dollars in today's money.¹ Since the contractor, Warren E. Green, was from New York, it seems likely that the masons, plasterers, and other specialty crafts were brought in from the City as well, adding to the cost.

¹The cottage near the gate was not included in the total. It was built the following year under a separate contract by Torrington mason F. W. Fuller. Mrs. Curtis also changed architects, employing the services of the firm of Wilder and White (Walter Robb Wilder and Harry Keith White) of New York for the cottage.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

8-3

Architectural Significance

Rye House epitomizes American country house architecture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although substantial in size and scale, such houses were in their day perceived as relatively informal, cozy, home-like retreats. For example, there are no grand staircases at Rye House, no ballroom, and only a modest dining room, appropriate for the family and a few visiting friends. There is a porte-cochere for arrivals, but only a small vestibule within, not the sort of place to accommodate guests by the dozens. Rye House's terrace, projecting rooms, and sun porches show the concern for fresh air, light, and relaxing vistas that was at the heart of country-house design.

In terms of its style, Rye House is also representative of the period's country houses, many if not most of which were built in some variant of the Tudor or Elizabethan Revival styles. The rustic materials, late-medieval details, and asymmetry of form implicit in the genre, all of which characteristics are well represented in Rye House, furthered the country-house program of "informal" living in picturesque surroundings.

Wilson Eyre

Wilson Eyre (1858-1944) studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then apprenticed as a draftsman in the office of James P. Sims in Philadelphia. Eyre succeeded Sims in the practice in the early 1880s and began a long career focused in large part on the design of country homes for the wealthy families of Philadelphia and New York City. Eyre had traveled widely in England and in Italy and found there his inspiration in rambling rural houses in which, in his words, "the garden formed as much a part of the house as the roof." In emphasizing aesthetics, craftsmanship, and integration of the house with its setting, Eyre was an influence on other architects of the period. He was active in exhibiting his designs (usually with water-colored charcoal sketches) and published some sixty articles in his lifetime in professional journals. He was a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Pennsylvania in 1926. In addition to his architectural activity, he was an avid painter and musician.

In 1908 Eyre published "The Planning of Country Houses" in **American Architect and Building News**, an explanation of the elements that made

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

8-4

for an ideal county house. Among other considerations, Eyre proposed the following:

- ▶ "the house should have its greatest exposure to the south . . . the entrance vestibule and as much as possible of the service portion of the house should be to the north"
- ▶ a courtyard on the north side leading from the entrance drive
- ▶ "if the ground on which the house stands slopes in any direction, terraces should be planned. A paved terrace on the sunny side of the house forms a delightful place to sit at certain seasons of the year."
- ▶ thick walls and an ample supply of windows, but not long stretches or groups of windows
- ▶ "open fireplaces should be in almost every room"

Eyre was able to fulfill each of these practical considerations in his design of a country house for Mrs. Curtis. Moreover, the design carried out many of Eyre's core aesthetic beliefs. Eyre thought that instead of burdening a house with a plethora of historical details, real or reproduced, the architect should select a few particularly interesting or exquisite items and place them in prominent locations where they could be seen. The medieval inscription, the garden gargoyle, and the corbel over the courtyard north entrance embody this principle of selection and overall, while identifiably in the Tudor or Elizabethan Revival style, the house is restrained in its use of ornamentation.

Eyre was also known for his preoccupation with textures: "everyday materials used in countless ways; varying the bonding and the mortar width in stone and brickwork, adze-dressing of timber, roughness in plaster surfaces" (Harbeson, 133). Rye House exemplifies well Eyre's use of texture in its rough stone and stucco exterior materials. Similarly, the house's simple, boldly proportioned oak interior woodwork reflects his interest in craftsmanship. In this respect, Eyre parallels the Craftsman movement in furniture and interior design which emphasized simple forms, traditional crafts, and natural materials. Eyre even espoused a sort of practical primitivism; he was quoted as saying, "there is no use in giving a man modern tools and telling him to do a bad job; give him primitive tools, and tell him to do the best job he can."

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Significance

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

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Finally, Rye House demonstrates Eyre's ability, so much admired by his contemporaries, to achieve a "harmonious, picturesque composition" uniting the house and its surroundings. The siting of the house on the crest of the hill, overlooking an open field, provided both a prominent setting for the house itself and a pleasant view from the south-facing rooms and the terrace. The retention of the fields and stone walls, the simple design of added walls and rough-hewn gates, and rustic garden elements such as the stone-pillared pergola furthered the illusion that the house and its surroundings had grown together over a long period of time.

Wilson Eyre was evidently well-satisfied with his Litchfield work and considered Rye House a suitable demonstration of his talents. In addition to publishing a perspective sketch and plan in **American Architect**, he featured the house in exhibitions at Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington Architectural Club) and the T-Square Club of Philadelphia, both in 1911.

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. 52 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

A	<u>18 642530</u>	<u>4620400</u>	B	<u>18 643200</u>	<u>4620420</u>
C	<u>18 643280</u>	<u>4619020</u>	D	<u>18 643040</u>	<u>4619640</u>

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: See continuation sheet.
 The boundary includes the two properties recorded in the Litchfield Assessor Records as Map 80, Block 81, Lots 9A and 10.

Boundary Justification: X See continuation sheet.

11. Form Prepared By

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

Organization: Public Archaeology Survey Team Date: March 14, 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**

Bibliography

**Rye House
Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT**

9-1

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_____. "Design for a House at Litchfield, Conn." *American Architect and Building News*, 29 (April 12, 1911).

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Note on archives:

Eyre's early plans and sketches are in the Architectural Archives of the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Early views of the gardens are reportedly preserved at the Smithsonian Institution in the Garden Club of America collection.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Photographs

Rye House

Photographs-1

Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT

All Photographs:

1. Rye House
2. Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT
3. PAST, Inc. Photo
4. November 1999
5. Negative filed with Connecticut Historical Commission
Hartford, CT

Captions:

View of house and setting from drive, camera facing northeast
Photograph 1 of 20

South elevation of house, camera facing north
Photograph 2 of 20

North and west elevations, camera facing southeast
Photograph 3 of 20

Detail of entrance on north elevation, camera facing south
Photograph 4 of 20

Detail of doors to terrace, south elevation, camera facing north
Photograph 5 of 20

Interior, main hallway, showing stairs to second floor, camera facing
northeast
Photograph 6 of 20

Interior, dining room, camera facing northwest
Photograph 7 of 20

Detail of mantel in hall, camera facing northeast
Photograph 8 of 20

Typical second-floor room, east end, showing doorway to bath on left,
camera facing west
Photograph 9 of 20

Detail of typical second-floor mantel, west end, camera facing east
Photograph 10 of 20
Detail of typical shutters, windows, and wainscot
Photograph 11 of 20

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Photographs

Rye House

Photographs-2

Litchfield, Litchfield County, CT

Detail of linen closet, first floor, west end
Photograph 12 of 20

Gates at turn in drive, with porte-cochere visible at end of drive,
camera facing east
Photograph 13 of 20

Remains of pergola west of house, camera facing southeast
Photograph 14 of 20

Detail of garden sculpture overlooking west terrace
Photograph 15 of 20

Detail of garden gate
Photograph 16 of 20

Water reservoir on hill north of house, camera facing east
Photograph 17 of 20

Garden house, camera facing west
Photograph 18 of 20

Cottage at gate, south and west elevations, camera facing northeast
Photograph 19 of 20

Modern garage north of house (noncontributing), camera facing north
Photograph 20 of 20