

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Alice Austen House

Other Name/Site Number: Clear Comfort

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 2 Hylen Boulevard

Not for publication:\_\_\_

City/Town: Staten Island

Vicinity:\_\_\_

State: NY County: Richmond Code: 085

Zip Code: 10305

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Private:\_\_\_  
Public-local: X  
Public-State:\_\_\_  
Public-Federal:\_\_\_

Building(s): X  
District:\_\_\_  
Site:\_\_\_  
Structure:\_\_\_  
Object:\_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property  
Contributing

Noncontributing

1  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
0 Total

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

Name of related multiple property listing:

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 3**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**6. FUNCTION OR USE**Historic: Domestic  
OtherSub: Single Dwelling  
Photography StudioCurrent: Recreation and Culture  
DomesticSub: Museum  
Single Dwelling**7. DESCRIPTION**Architectural Classification:  
Mid-19th Century  
Gothic RevivalMaterials:  
Foundation: Fieldstone  
Walls: Clapboard, Stone  
Roof: Cedar shingle  
Other: Wood (bargeboard,  
lattice-work, decorative  
cresting)

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 4**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**DESCRIPTION OF SITE:<sup>1</sup>

The Alice Austen House, although nominated for its historical significance between 1867 and 1945, also possesses architectural significance prior to and including that period. The house was built in stages dating from approximately 1700, although it did not achieve its present appearance of a Gothic cottage until the latter part of the 19th century. The original 18th-century portion of the house is significant in that it is a surviving example of a half-timbered and stucco building unique for its late-Medieval design and built using English construction techniques.

The Alice Austen House is located on a plot of land approximately one acre in size on the east shore of Staten Island. The house faces the Verrazano Narrows in a suburban neighborhood formerly known as Clifton and within an area known as Rosebank. The house has one and a half stories and a cellar, and is roughly T-shaped with the top of the T lying parallel to the water. The east (front) facade of the house has five irregularly spaced bays between door and windows and corresponds to the top of the T. The foundation is fieldstone and cut stone. The walls are principally of clapboard and painted white except for the walls of the kitchen and dining wing and the south wall which are of fieldstone roughly patched with cement mortar and whitewashed. A porch extends the full length of the east facade facing the water. It has six bays with trellis-work supported by intervening lattice panels. Another porch, smaller and enclosed, is on the north side of the house. There are three chimneys. The north and south chimneys are similar in design built of brick with common bond and a projecting header course at the next to last top course. The north chimney has Tudor-style pots. The third chimney is in the western wing above the kitchen and the west attic room. It is built of brick with common bond and projecting bands of headers.

The house was built in several stages: A) the original, central portion of the house; B) a one-room addition at the south end; C) a one and a half story constructed at the rear giving the house an L-shaped plan; D) a one room extension to the north end of the house; E) the addition of a kitchen section at the rear of the house which is no longer extant; F) the addition of a porch

---

<sup>1</sup> This architectural description is based on *The Alice Austen House Historic Structure Report*, prepared by Architectural Historian Shirley A. Zavin, Architect Raymond F. Pavia, Historical Consultant Ann Novotny, August 1979, and used with permission of Mitchell Grubler, Executive Director, Alice Austen House Museum and Garden; *Historic American Building Survey Report NY-5472*, prepared by Diana S. Waite, May 1968; Architectural drawings and plans prepared by architects Beyer, Blinder, Belle, John Stubbs, principal, 1985; January 1992 site visit by Jill S. Mesirow.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 5**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

(later enclosed) at the north end of the house, along with the construction of a projecting bay window at the rear of section B; G) twentieth-century additions (1900, 1945) in order to have modern plumbing facilities (figure 1).

Section A, ca. 1700-1725

The original portion of the Austen House was a one room, one and a half story, gable-roofed structure set close to the water. It was built using the late-Medieval exposed frame or half-timber technique. The massive beams were hand hewn with a broadaxe, and the infilling consists of bricks, clay and mortar nogging coated with plaster and then whitewashed. As the house was enlarged, portions of the exterior walls of this section were lost; however, the exterior portion of the west wall is preserved behind section C (added 1750-1775). A plexiglas covered "hole" in the east wall of this addition provides a look at this original wall (photo 13). In addition, on the second floor of section C, another "hole" exhibits the 36 inch hand split cedar shingles that covered the upper story. Also visible are early roofing shingles and portions of the original gutter.

The original cellar was probably shallow, although very little evidence remains due to later construction. The east wall, obscured by concrete, remains but the fireplace wall has been replaced. The foundation is of roughly laid fieldstone.

Some of the original interior finishing remains extant including heavy hand-planed widely-spaced vertical and horizontal timbers used for framing. Also, the original 16-inch wide floor boards on the second story that form the "ceiling" are intact. Flooring, molding, door and window surrounds date from later periods.

Section B, 1725-50

This one room addition to the south of the main structure (photo 2) is somewhat smaller than the original section of the house and uses construction methods more traditional for the period. This addition extended the gable roof and the one and a half story original house. As a result, the south foundation wall was removed. The foundation of the addition is similar to the original house--roughly laid fieldstone pointed with sand and lime. The original cellar was entered by the existing hatchway at the southeast corner. The central portion of the south wall of the addition is occupied by the chimney base consisting of two stone piers supporting the hearth and chimney.

As a result of this addition, the floorplan of the house was altered somewhat. A center hall was created by partitioning off the two southernmost bents of the original one room house. The doors entering into the new hall at both ends and the two rooms flanking it are all equally wide, and seem to date from the period of this addition. The present double or "Dutch" front door, with its five-light transom and wide muntins, also dates from this period. The door surrounds date from a later period.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 6**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Much of the original material of this addition is extant. The flooring on both the first and second floors, consisting of wide boards laid with splines and handmade nails, is original. The beams are massive, but less so than in the first section of the house and they are less widely spaced. Windows in this addition have been altered several times.

The south wall fireplace is the most prominent feature of the addition. The original construction consists of perpendicular jambs 7 1/2 feet apart and topped by an oak lintel. A shallow smoke channel, which widens as it ascends, is located at the rear as an early attempt to remove the draft. The chimney narrows slightly toward the ceiling. This fireplace was covered with decorative woodwork and tiles during the occupancy of the Austen family in the mid-19th century.

The exterior south wall of this addition is original in appearance. The lower masonry portion, composed of small stones, rises to a height of 10 feet. Above are early, but not original, clapboards nailed with machine cut nails. Small 6-over-6 windows flank the chimney in the upper story.

Section C, 1750-75

This section of the house consists of a one and a half story stone wing added to the west of the house which originally housed the kitchen (photo 4). Constructed of field stone with a gable roof, the walls are 7 feet high on the north and south ends, and the west wall is 15 feet high. Originally the fireplace had an oven projecting beyond the plane of the west wall, which dates the addition as pre-Revolutionary; later ovens were placed at the side of the fireplace. The fireplace and floor level in the kitchen are original, although the lintel of the fireplace was once higher as indicated by the row of bevelled bricks seen inside the opening. The beams in the kitchen addition are roughhewn and were intended to be boxed in.

Construction of outbuildings, 1775-1844

There were no significant changes made to the Austen House between the post-Revolutionary period and 1844. The locations of the earliest outbuildings are unknown; however, two structures within the present boundaries of the Austen House appear on 19th-century maps. By 1839, it appears that there was a long rectangular structure, approximately equal in length (on the east-west axis) to the depth of the present house, about 56 feet directly behind the stone kitchen wing. The plan suggests this structure was not attached to that wing, but was connected by some sort of areaway. In addition, another larger building was located approximately 50 feet northwest of the Austen House, beyond what is now the rear (west) property line. These structures are no longer standing.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 7**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section D, 1844-46; Section E, ca. 1852; other alterations prior to 1860

When the Austen family purchased the house in 1844, it was probably in a severe state of disrepair. The Austens made repairs, renovations and alterations that continued over an extended period of time. The additions done prior to 1860 consisted primarily of repairs and stabilization, and the addition of a one room wing in order to make the house habitable. Until 1852, it seemed to have been used as a summer house.

By 1846, land maps indicate that the structure behind the kitchen wing had been demolished, and that a one room addition at the north end was at least partially completed (photo 1). In the construction of this portion of the house, the north wall and chimney of the original section of the house (Section A) was demolished. The foundation for this new wing is constructed of squared, carefully-faced stones well laid with lime and sand mortar. This north addition extends the one and a half story and gable roof of the original house.

Also at this time, the foundation of Section A along the north side was replaced; a new hatchway was built here as well. In addition, 14 feet of the north sill of the original house was replaced and the rotten ends of four beams, which were reinforced by adding three foot sections, were securely attached to the side of the floor beams with wooden pins. The floor beams in Section D are much smaller than those in Sections A and B.

On the exterior of the house, the Austens added the facade porch with trellis-work supports and intervening lattice panels. They placed a scalloped bargeboard under the porch roof eaves, inserted diamond pane glazing in the upper half of the Dutch door and constructed dormer windows in the main section of the house. Also during this remodeling, new roofing boards were installed in sections A and B, and the entire roof was re-shingled; a bargeboard was placed under the dormer eaves (photo 1).

On the interior of the house, every room--except the second floor south bedroom--required re-plastering; also, flooring was replaced, molding around all doors added, and south wall ventilators were installed. In addition, 6 1/2 foot built-in cupboards and an oak closet, both with gilt moldings and decorative patent cast hinges, were installed in the main room of section A (photos 11, 12), along with built-in wardrobes in the second floor rooms.

Also during this time span, the original stairs were replaced by a two-run staircase which provided access to the second floor from the rear of the house. In order to enlarge the dining room, the Austen's excavated it and thus lowered the floor about one foot.

Section E, an addition presumably to house laundry facilities, was built to the rear of the kitchen section. It was demolished in 1945.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 8**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section F, 1860-78

Between 1860 and 1878, the Austen family conducted more alterations on their house, but rather than repair and restoration work, this series of changes served to improve the appearance of the house and complete the Gothicization begun earlier. Exterior alterations included the elongation of east porch windows, the use of diamond pane glass on windows and storm doors, new window molding and decorative cresting and bargeboard added to the roof.

Section F, a faceted one-story porch at the north end of the house, was completed by 1878 (photo 6). The roof would not be constructed for another ten years; however, given the elongated east window in the second story north bedroom, the roof was originally intended. Entrance to the first floor of the porch was gained from the exterior through a doorway in the east face of the porch. When the porch was added, the east window on the north wall of the first floor bedroom was also converted to an internal door. Other alterations of this period on the exterior include the projecting faceted bay window on the west facade (photos 3, 10) and Gothic cresting and bargeboard on the rear portion of the house.

On the interior of the house, further decorative embellishments included built-in cupboards on the west wall of the second-floor north bedroom, construction of built-in diamond pane bookcases flanking the chimney in the parlor, and the perforated scroll work covering the parlor fireplace mantel (photos 8, 9)

Section G, ca. 1900

Changes in the Austen household between 1878 and 1900 are reflected in the alterations to the house. Alice Austen's aunt and uncle, Oswald and Mary Muller, also lived at "Clear Comfort" and they altered the second-floor north end of the house to create a semi-autonomous apartment. They built the enclosed second floor to the north porch along with an outside staircase leading to the second floor.

Section G, a two story wood frame addition was attached to the west side of Section D (photo 5). This small structure did not have a cellar and crawl space, and was probably to provide indoor toilet facilities for the first time. This addition required disruption to Section D; the exterior west wall was cut through to connect D and G, and the west slope of the roof was raised to provide enough height to the second floor of the addition. The lower roof slope of the addition intersects with the roof of the kitchen wing.

Other improvements during this period include re-roofing the entire house and some interior modifications. Built-in cabinets were installed in the second floor bedrooms, and probably some sort of kitchen facilities were created in what had become the Muller's second floor apartment. Also, the west entry-way area and the cellar hatchway were altered. The cellar hatchway ramp



**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 9**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

was replaced by a simple one-story pitched roof shed added to the existing entry.

The only other change that occurred to the house during Alice Austen's residency was the installation of a 1080-gallon fuel-oil storage tank and boiler in 1929.

#### Post-Austen Residency, 1945-1985

In 1945, the new owners of the Austen house made several alterations. The enclosed porch on the north side of the house was removed following extensive damage from a hurricane in 1944. The first story of the north wall of Section D was re-clapboarded following the removal of the porch. The rear wood frame extension (Section E, laundry facilities) was also removed, and the internal door was converted to a window. Also, the exterior door on the west side of Section G was closed and replaced by a window in preparation for modernizing the bathroom. Section H (photo 3) was created when the staircase was enclosed; panelling was inserted to screen the central staircase from the first-floor hall, lower winders were removed and a new exterior door was installed on the west facade.

Later, two gothic windows from the north porch demolished in 1945 were placed in the first-floor window openings of Section D at the north corner of the east facade and the east corner of the north facade (it cannot be determined if this was done during the 1945 alterations). The projecting bay window, located on the west facade of Section B, was removed and replaced by a modern one-over-one sash. Cabinetry around the parlor fireplace was removed in the 1960s; it was stored in a rear shed which later burned down.

Alterations to the gardens surrounding "Clear Comfort" since the late nineteenth century include the erosion of beach and the destruction of crib walls, loss of mature trees standing ca. 1896, and the loss of the original entrance drive along the shore and the former flight of stairs that descended eastward from the front door. The change to the ground plan is the result of tropical storms along the shore and in the area from the high water line to 60 feet from the front of the house; however, little change has occurred to the ground plan on the perimeter of the house. Some vegetation planted as seedlings by the Austens remain as major shade trees. A service drive, entering the property from Hylan Boulevard northwest of the house, was built in the 1940s and remains today as the only vehicular access to the property.

#### 1985 Restoration

The City of New York acquired the Austen House in 1975 and placed it under the supervision of the Department of Parks and Recreation. In 1985, the architectural firm of Beyer, Blinder, Belle restored the house to reflect its appearance in the late 19th century during Alice Austen's occupancy.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 10**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Much of the work conducted by the architectural firm involved stabilizing the house. The rest of the work was to recreate portions of the fabric that had been damaged or removed. On the exterior of the house, the exterior walls and foundation were reinforced and stabilized. Existing double hung windows on the east facade were replaced by double glazed French doors with exterior wood shutters. Other windows were repaired and replaced. A new cedar shingle roof was installed, and the gutters, a dormer and the birdhouse pinnacles on the roof were reconstructed. Also rebuilt was the east facade porch rail and wood bench. The faceted north end porch and exterior staircase were rebuilt, although the second floor of the porch was not enclosed.

On the first floor (figures 3, 5) interior, damaged flooring was removed and replaced retaining as many original floorboards as possible. In the parlor, the projecting bay window was rebuilt, and the built-in wood cabinets and decorative fireplace mantle were reconstructed. A new bathroom was installed in Section H; and the existing bathroom in Section G was remodeled for handicap access.

On the second floor (figures 4, 6) more work was done to repair the original elements of the house. Again, flooring was removed and replaced, retaining as many of the original floorboards as possible. A new bathroom was installed toward the southern end of the house. The Muller's second floor apartment was renovated to be suitable for a caretaker residence. A kitchen was installed and the former bathroom (Section G) was rebuilt. Despite the alterations, the built-in storage cabinets in the living/dining room and bedroom all remain intact. Entrance to this caretaker apartment is through the back staircase located in Section C.

Currently the Alice Austen House is used as a museum facility and residence. The parlor has been furnished with Austen family furnishings, and the two front rooms (the original Section A and Section D) along with the dining room (portion of Section C) are used as exhibit space. The enclosed north porch is the museum gift shop, and the kitchen is the administrative office. The second floor is used for storage, except for the apartment which is inhabited by a family. Alice Austen's darkroom remains intact.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 11**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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

Applicable National Register Criteria:       A       B X   C X   D    

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

NHL Criteria:   2, 4

NHL Theme(s):   XXV. Prints and Photography  
                  XXX. American Ways of Life  
                      H.    Suburban Life  
                  XVI. Architecture  
                      E.    Gothic Revival  
                          1.   Early Gothic Revival

Areas of Significance:   Art  
                          Social History  
                          Architecture

Period(s) of Significance:   1867-1945

Significant Dates:           1876

Significant Person(s):       Alice Austen

Cultural Affiliation:         N/A

Architect/Builder:

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 12**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:**

Elizabeth Alice Austen (1866-1952), better known as Alice, was a remarkable photographer who took photos that document not only "a long vanished social life of ritualized leisure pursuits," but also a certain innocence of American society that has long since disappeared.<sup>1</sup> About half of the 7,000 photos taken during her lifetime are presently at the Staten Island Historical Society and the Alice Austen House Museum. As a collection they establish her as the earliest American woman of importance in photography.<sup>2</sup> At "Clear-Comfort," her home for seventy-eight years of her life, all of her pictures were developed in the darkroom on the second floor and rinsed under the pump out back. In addition, "Clear Comfort" influenced Austen's photographs; she used the house and gardens as background as well as subject matter.

Alice Austen is unique in that her photographs predate in subject matter and technique the photographs of other giants in the field. She took her first photos in the late 1870s "some twenty years before Edward Steichen bought his first camera in Milwaukee or Eugene Atget began to record the streets and people of Paris, twenty-five before Jacques-Henri Lartique began his album of family and friends on the beaches and in the gardens of middle-class France," at the time when Alfred Stieglitz had only just exposed his first negative in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> Alice Austen is also significant in that she achieved professional photographic skills by the early 1880s, "a decade or more before the early work of comparable contemporaries such as Gertrude Kasebier (1852-1934), Chansonetta Stanley Emmons (1852-1934), Frances Benjamin Johnson (1864-1952) or Jessie Tarbox Beals (1871-1942)."<sup>4</sup> Austen's photographs were more similar to those of the men of her period. Although she used the same subjects as the women photographers of her time, her pictures have a realistic and natural edge rather than the blurry romantic view advocated by magazines of the time. Austen also veered away from the conventional studio poses; instead she took pictures of people during the course of their

---

<sup>1</sup> Friends of Alice Austen, *Alice Austen: "The Larky Life"*, with a foreword by Mitchell Grubler (New York: Privately Printed, 1991), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Jensen, *The Revolt of American Women*, 2nd ed., A Harvest Special (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Jensen, 162; Shirley Zavín, Raymond Pavia, and Ann Novotny, *The Alice Austen House Historic Structures Report* (Staten Island, NY: Friends of Alice Austen House, August 1979): 137.

<sup>4</sup> *Alice Austen House Historic Structures Report*, 137.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 13**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

normal activities. Austen saw herself as a participant rather than a spectator and with the use of her time-release cord she became one.<sup>5</sup> According to the National Park Service thematic framework, "Clear Comfort" falls under themes: XXV. Prints and Photography; XXX. American Ways of Life, H. Suburban Life; XVI. Architecture, E. Gothic Revival.

Although Alice Austen lived at several other residences for brief periods in her later years, only "Clear-Comfort" is important to her career. In the opinion of George Szekely and Dianna Gabay, "a building is like a garment, a second outer skin. Some buildings fit our bodies and our spirits. . . ."<sup>6</sup> For Alice Austen this statement clearly sums up her relationship with "Clear-Comfort," whose open spaces and lovely views of the sea gave her photos a personal touch that is missing from many of the photos of the Victorian age.

Alice Austen was born March 17, 1866, only a quarter of a mile away from her grandparents' home "Clear-Comfort." When she was only a year old her parents separated. Her father, Edward Munn, abandoned Alice and her mother, after which they moved to "Clear-Comfort." Edward Munn was never mentioned again and Austen became Alice's legal name.<sup>7</sup> The Austen family was able to afford to buy Alice the equipment necessary for her photography.

In 1876 Alice's Uncle Oswald Muller gave her her first camera. Although she later claimed to have been self-taught and "simply learned by doing," it seems natural that she would have received photography instruction both from Muller and her uncle Peter Austen, a chemistry professor at Dartmouth and Rutgers.<sup>8</sup> Austen's family created a darkroom for her at "Clear Comfort" by transforming a small storage closet; they installed wide shelves and hooks to hang drying prints. It is still extant today. Alice had a mind suited for technical subjects and, although she was sent to Miss Erving's fashionable school until she was about sixteen, she was soon back at "Clear-Comfort" mastering the art of photography.<sup>9</sup> Although Austen referred to her early pictures

---

<sup>5</sup> John A. Garraty, ed. *Dictionary of American Biography*, Supplemental Vol. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), s.v. "Austen, (Elizabeth) Alice," by Judith Mara Gutman.

<sup>6</sup> George Szekely and Dianna Gabay, *A Study of a Community: Staten Island Architecture and Environment* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Continuum of Education, Inc., 1980), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Novotny, *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of an American Original: Alice Austen, 1866-1952*, with a preface by Oliver Jensen (Old Greenwich, CT: The Chatham Press, 1976), 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 14**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

as "greenhorn luck," her photos reveal a use of advanced techniques.<sup>10</sup>

Women were only marginally involved in photography prior to 1880. Viewed as a "professional endeavor," women only had access to photography if they served as assistants to their husbands. Only rarely did they strike out on their own. Furthermore, the sheer technological difficulty of photography and the enormous weight of the cameras (in excess of 50 pounds) discouraged women from entering the field. The process of developing wet plate glass negatives was exacting, complicated, and expensive. But, by the late 1880s, technological advances encouraged women to become photographers. Dry plate negatives made developing easier, and the invention of the "detective camera" allowed women to photograph subjects unobtrusively and thus avoid offending the prevailing Victorian sensibilities. Thus, the image of photography shifted from a scientific endeavor to an artistic one--an endeavor suited to Victorian women.<sup>11</sup>

Alice Austen is an exception to the image of Victorian women photographers. According to Oliver Jensen, who helped to rediscover her work, "photography was an odd hobby for a girl of her class, especially one from such a sheltered background."<sup>12</sup> Alice shunned the misty-eyed view of the romantic in favor of a realistic outlook on life. "Although she had great affection for life, she also had a keen sense of perception and a gently mocking wit" which set her pictures off from the crowd.<sup>13</sup> Alice Austen's friends soon became used to the sight of her and her camera and willingly posed; they pretended to be drunk on tea, they acted out tableaux in the cemetery, or they held impossible winning hands in cards.<sup>14</sup> Often Austen would make them pose for over an hour because she wanted her pictures "just so."<sup>15</sup>

Many of Austen's pictures explored not only conventional Victorian morals but also gender roles. Often, she and her friends are shown in intimate poses, revealing glimpses of underwear or sharing a bed--private things that no man would have dared to photograph. Other pictures show cigarettes dangling

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Jane C. Gover, *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988): 5-7.

<sup>12</sup> Novotny, 9.

<sup>13</sup> "The Newly Discovered Picture World of Alice Austen: Great Woman Photographer Steps Out of the Past," *Life*, 24 September 1951, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Friends of Alice Austen, *Alice Austen: "The Larky Life,"* 2.

<sup>15</sup> Novotny, 47.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 15**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

from their lips (at a time when women could be arrested for smoking in public). To further test gender boundaries Austen would dress her friends in male clothing and encourage them to parody what they viewed as typical male poses.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps her rebellion against conventional Victorian standards explains the fact that Austen never married. Her friends said, "she was too good for men, that is she could do everything better."<sup>17</sup> Instead, she and friend Gertrude Tate formed a fifty-year partnership in which each complemented the other.<sup>18</sup> Austen and Gertrude Tate traveled extensively. In her lifetime Austen made over twenty trips abroad and travelled through much of the United States.

In New York City Alice Austen photographed everything from Admiral Dewey's return from Manila to the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>19</sup> Austen, at the request of Dr. Doty of the U.S. Public Health Service, took pictures of the quarantine facilities on Staten Island, as well as near-by Hoffman and Swineburn islands. This series was shown at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 in Buffalo.<sup>20</sup> Another of her activities in New York was to photograph people she found interesting. From immigrants, who she photographed decades before Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine discovered their plight, to the antics of children, Alice Austen captured the flavor of New York.<sup>21</sup> Although she did not sell any pictures formally, she did send approximately 150 prints to the Library of Congress to be copyrighted, including a collection of her "Street-Types." Several of these pictures, including views of "Clear-Comfort," were turned into postcards.<sup>22</sup>

When tennis arrived at the Staten Island Cricket and Baseball Club in 1876, Austen was not only provided with a wealth of new picture taking opportunities but also became a great player herself.<sup>23</sup> Austen's pictures of her and her friends at play dispel many of the myths about Victorian women.<sup>24</sup> By illustrating her friend Maria Ward's book, *Bicycling for Ladies*, in 1896, Austen gives us insight into middle-class women's

---

<sup>16</sup> Gover, 120-121.

<sup>17</sup> Jensen, *The Revolt of Women*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Novotny, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Lynn Sherr and Jurate Kazicka, *The American Woman's Gazetteer* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 172.

<sup>20</sup> Novotny, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Novotny, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Novotny., 159.

<sup>23</sup> Novotny, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Gover, 117.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 16**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

interest in exercise, and provides a contrasting view to the advice of the Victorian doctors who advocated little exercise for women and were specially divided on bicycling.<sup>25</sup>

Alice Austen's photography realistically challenged and dispelled many assumptions of women's activity in Victorian society. In fact, much of her work mocked Victorian mores and questioned established Victorian beliefs.<sup>26</sup> For example, her "mirror image" photograph depicting two masked women with their hair down, dressed in short petticoats, and defiantly smoking cigarettes challenged at least three Victorian sensibilities: long hair was considered too sensuous for Victorian society; short skirts were immoral and scandalous; and women could be arrested for smoking in public.<sup>27</sup>

Austen did not allow Victorian society to constrict her. In fact, she "didn't give a tinkers damn if she exposed her ankles while climbing a fence post in pursuit of the picture she wanted."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Alice Austen's photos are a liberating force for women. By challenging many Victorian notions on the activities and demeanor of "proper" women, Austen's photos show that women could have just as much fun as men.<sup>29</sup>

In later years, Austen fell on hard times as she unwisely invested all of her money in the stock market. The Crash of 1929 wiped her out, but she refused to admit it, and her first mortgage on "Clear-Comfort" went to finance a trip to Europe. Austen managed to hold onto her house until June 1945 when the bank foreclosed. Among the casualties were the loss of many of her photos to a furniture dealer from New Jersey.<sup>30</sup> Approximately half of her photographs were saved at the last minute by the Staten Island Historical Society.<sup>31</sup>

Together Austen and Tate moved to an apartment in Staten Island, but they were unsuccessful in putting their lives back in order. By this time, Austen was 79, her health was not steady, and she had lost the fight with arthritis in her hands long ago. When Gertrude Tate broke her arm in 1949 their relationship was

---

<sup>25</sup> John S. Haller, Jr. and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 174.

<sup>26</sup> Gover, 117-18.

<sup>27</sup> Jensen, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Novotny, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Gover, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Novotny, 192-194.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver E. Allen, "Williamsburg on the Subway," *American Heritage* 42 (June 1991): 105.



**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 17**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

correspondingly shattered as she could no longer take care of Austen. Alice Austen drifted from nursing home to nursing home until finally, by 1950, she was so poor she signed all her possessions over to Gertrude Tate and became a pauper. On June 24, 1950, she took up residence in the Staten Island Farm Colony, the city's house for the destitute.<sup>32</sup>

In October 1950 Constance Foulk Robert, while doing research with Oliver Jensen for their book *The Revolt of Women*, discovered Austen's pictures which were collecting dust in the basement of the Staten Island Historical Society.<sup>33</sup> Oliver Jensen, later editor of *American Heritage*, began a crusade on the behalf of Alice Austen and soon her photos were prominently displayed in magazines such as *Life* and *Holiday*. Enough money was raised to move Austen to a nursing home. Austen died a year later on June 9, 1952, after enjoying a brief taste of fame including "Alice Austen Day" held by the Staten Island Historical Society.<sup>34</sup>

Austen spent much time documenting each corner of her house because of her realization that her world "would not endure forever."<sup>35</sup> These pictures were essential to the painstaking restoration done at the Alice Austen House.<sup>36</sup> The main claim that "Clear-Comfort" has on Austen's career is that it marks both the beginning and the ending of her work due to the crippling arthritis in her hands. Her only picture taken after leaving "Clear-Comfort" was in 1951 when she took a picture of *Life* photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt using his camera.<sup>37</sup>

Alice Austen is important, not only for her subject matter, but for the innovative, realistic way she viewed the world around her. In the opinion of Paul Vanderbilt, the curator of photographs at the Library of Congress:

She provided the best connected photographic record of elegant family life of the 80s and 90s that I have ever seen. . . . She was exceptionally good in her choice of subject matter, and she had a sense of humor and a kind

---

<sup>32</sup> Novotny, 195-196.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret R. Buckwalter, ed., *Alice Austen: Commemorative Journal* (New York: Privately Printed, 1986), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Jensen, *The Revolt of Women*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Novotny, 160.

<sup>36</sup> Teresa L. Waite, "A 'Larky Life' in a Cottage on the Staten Island Shore" *New York Times*, 15 September 1991, 46.

<sup>37</sup> "The Newly Discovered Picture World of Alice Austen," 144.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 18**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

of observation of what was worth taking a picture of that was ahead of her time.<sup>38</sup>

Alice Austen was clearly in the forefront of documentary photography, and her photos are a rich treasure for better understanding of early 20th century life in America. Her home provided the space and inspiration for her work.

---

<sup>38</sup> Novotny, 160.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 19**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Allen, Oliver E. "Williamsburg on the Subway." *American Heritage* 42 (June 1991): 94-107.

Buckwalter, Margaret R., ed. *Alice Austen Commemorative Journal*. New York: Privately Printed, 1986.

Friends of Alice Austen House. *Alice Austen: "The Larky Life."* With a Forward by Mitchell Grubler. New York: Privately Printed, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Rambling Through Rosebank: A Walking Tour of Alice Austen's Neighborhood*. New York: Privately Printed, 1991.

Gover, C. Jane. *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America*. SUNY Series in the New Cultural History, ed. William R. Taylor. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Garraty, John A., ed. *Dictionary of American Biography*. Supplemental Vol. 5. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977. S.v. "Austen, (Elizabeth) Alice," by Judith Mara Gutman.

Haller, John S. Jr., and Robin M. Haller. *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1974.

Jensen, Oliver. *The Revolt of American Women*. 2d ed. A Harvest Special. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Windows on Another Time." *American Heritage* 39 (March 1988): 38-52.

"The Newly Discovered Picture World of Alice Austen: Great Woman Photographer Steps out of the Past." *Life*, 24 September 1951, 137-144.

Novotny, Ann. *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of an American Original: Alice Austen, 1866-1952*. With a Preface by Oliver Jensen. Old Greenwich, CT: The Chatham Press, 1976.

Sherr, Lynn, and Jurate Kazicka. *The American Woman's Gazetteer*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

Szekely, George, and Dianna Gabay. *A Study of a Community: Staten Island Architecture and Environment*. Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Continuum of Education, Inc., 1980.

Tinling, Marion. *Women Remembered: A Guide to Landmarks of Women's History in the United States*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 20**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Waite, Teresa L. "A 'Larky Life' in a Cottage on the Staten Island Shore." *New York Times*, 15 September 1991, 46.

Ward, Maria E. *Bicycling for Ladies*. New York: Bretano's, 1896.

Zavin, Shirley A., Raymond F. Pavia, and Ann Novotny. *The Alice Austen Historic Structure Report*. Staten Island, NY: Friends of Alice Austen House, Inc., August 1979.

## 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: #NY-5472
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # \_\_\_\_\_

## Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other: Staten Island Historical Society

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreeage of Property:            Approximately one (1) acre

UTM References:    Zone Northing Easting

                  A 18    4496230    579200

Verbal Boundary Description:

The Alice Austen House is located in the borough of Staten Island in the City and State of New York. According to the tax map, the property is located on Lot 49, block 2830.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary is that of the property which has historically been associated with the life of photographer Alice Austen.

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Jill S. Mesirow; Dr. Page Putnam Miller  
Org.: National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History  
Street/#: 400 A Street, SE  
City/Town: Washington  
State: District of Columbia  
ZIP: 20003  
Telephone: (202) 544-2422  
Date: June 23, 1992

ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE  
Site Plan

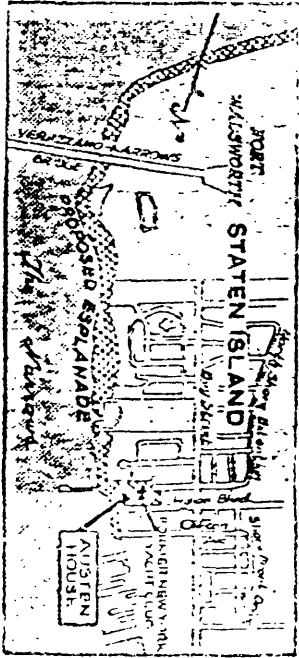
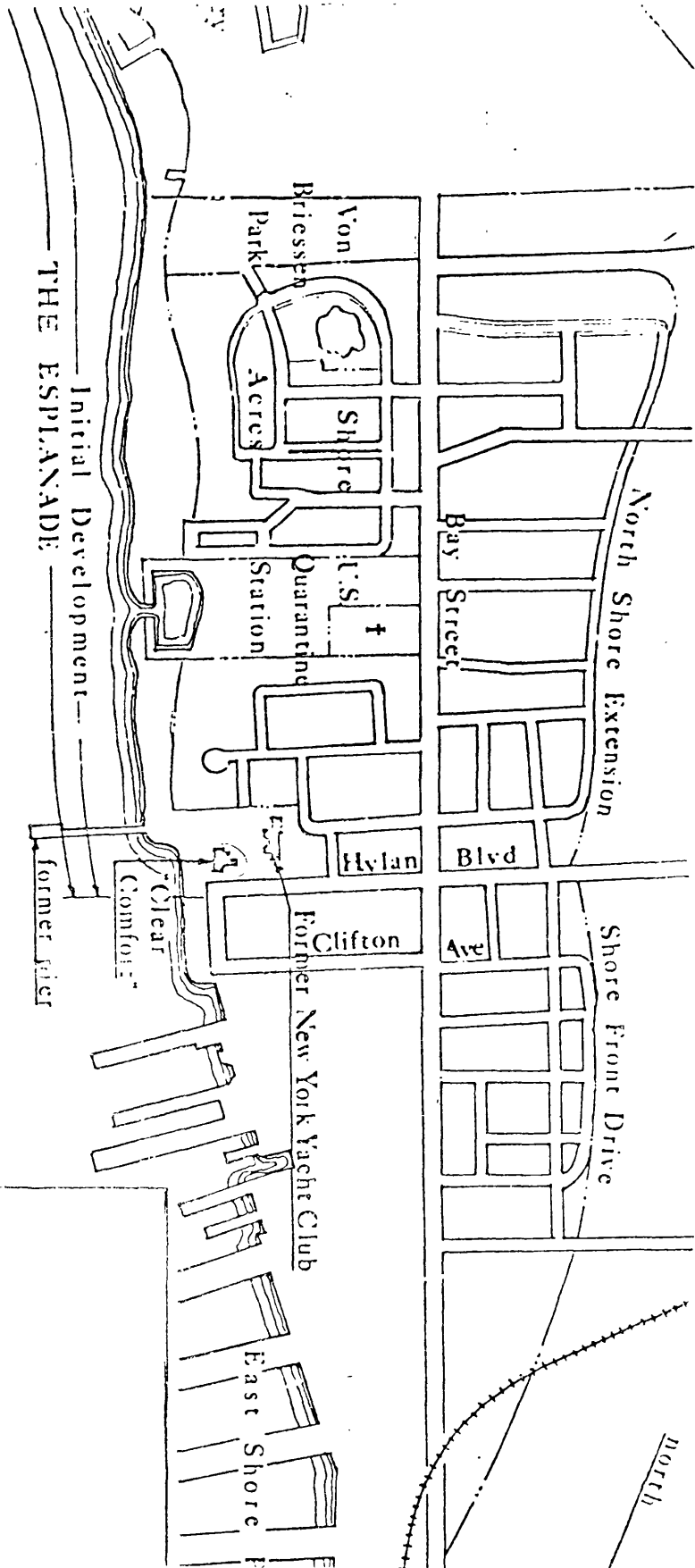
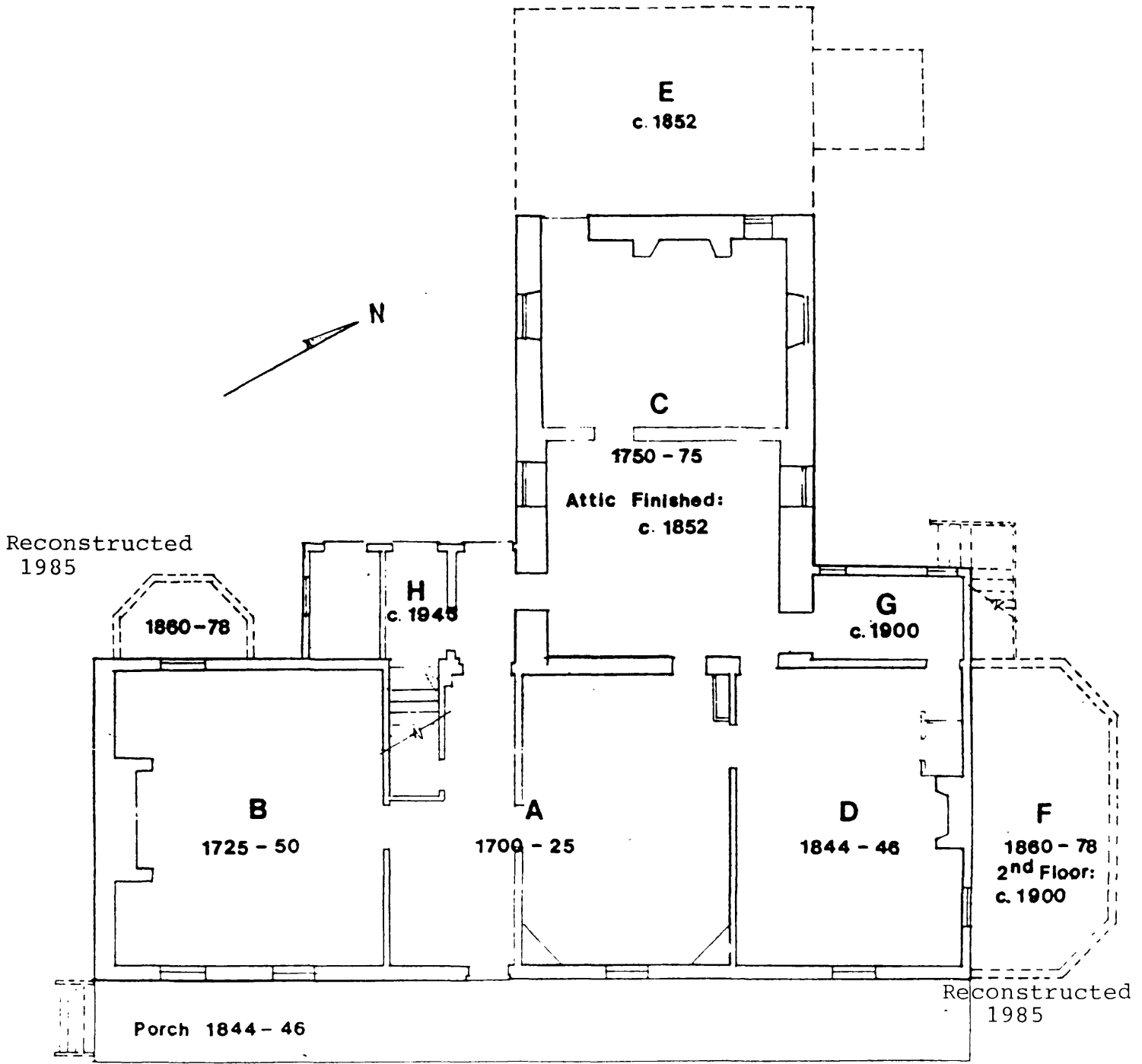


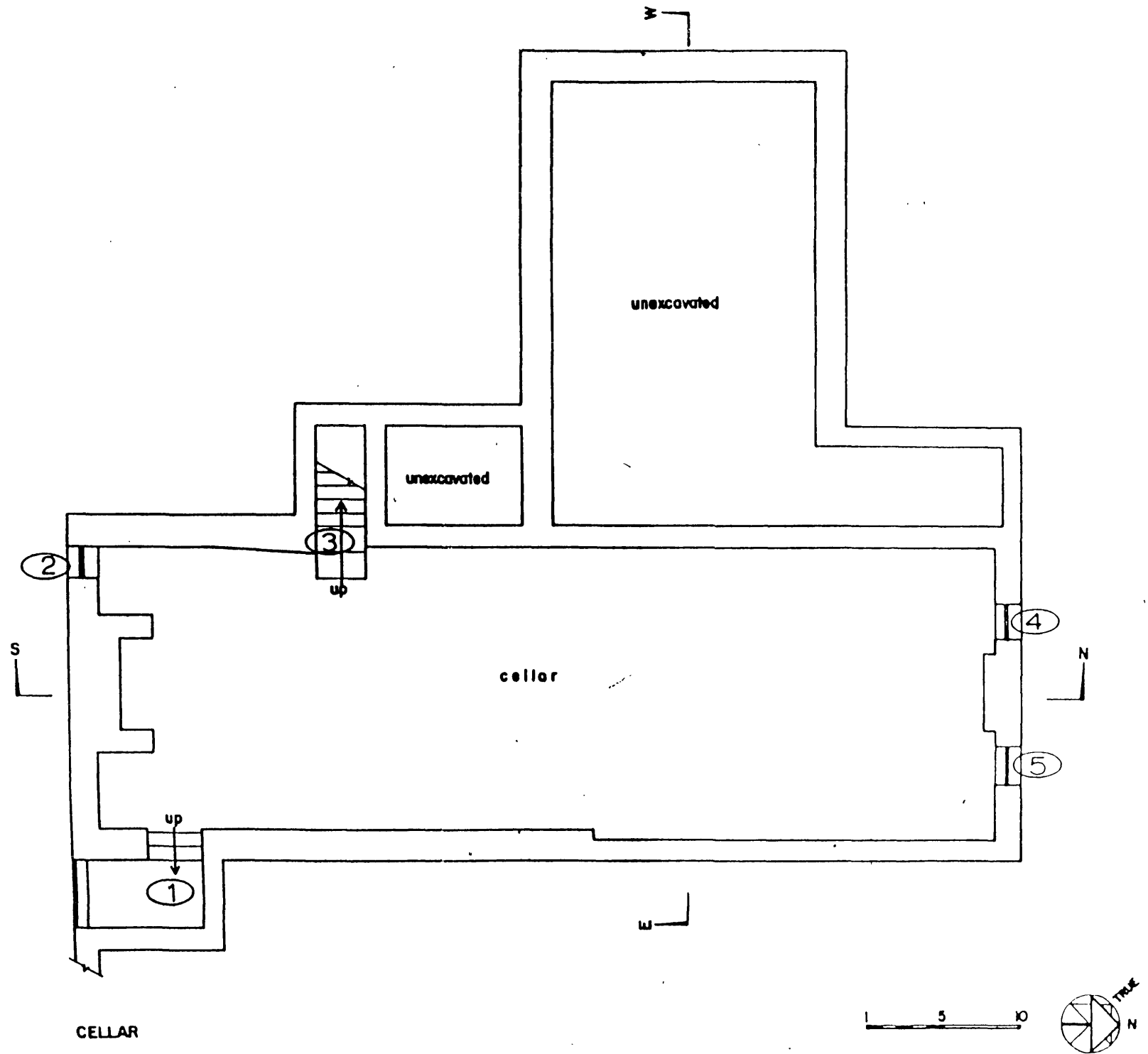
Figure 1.  
Dates of Construction



DATES OF CONSTRUCTION

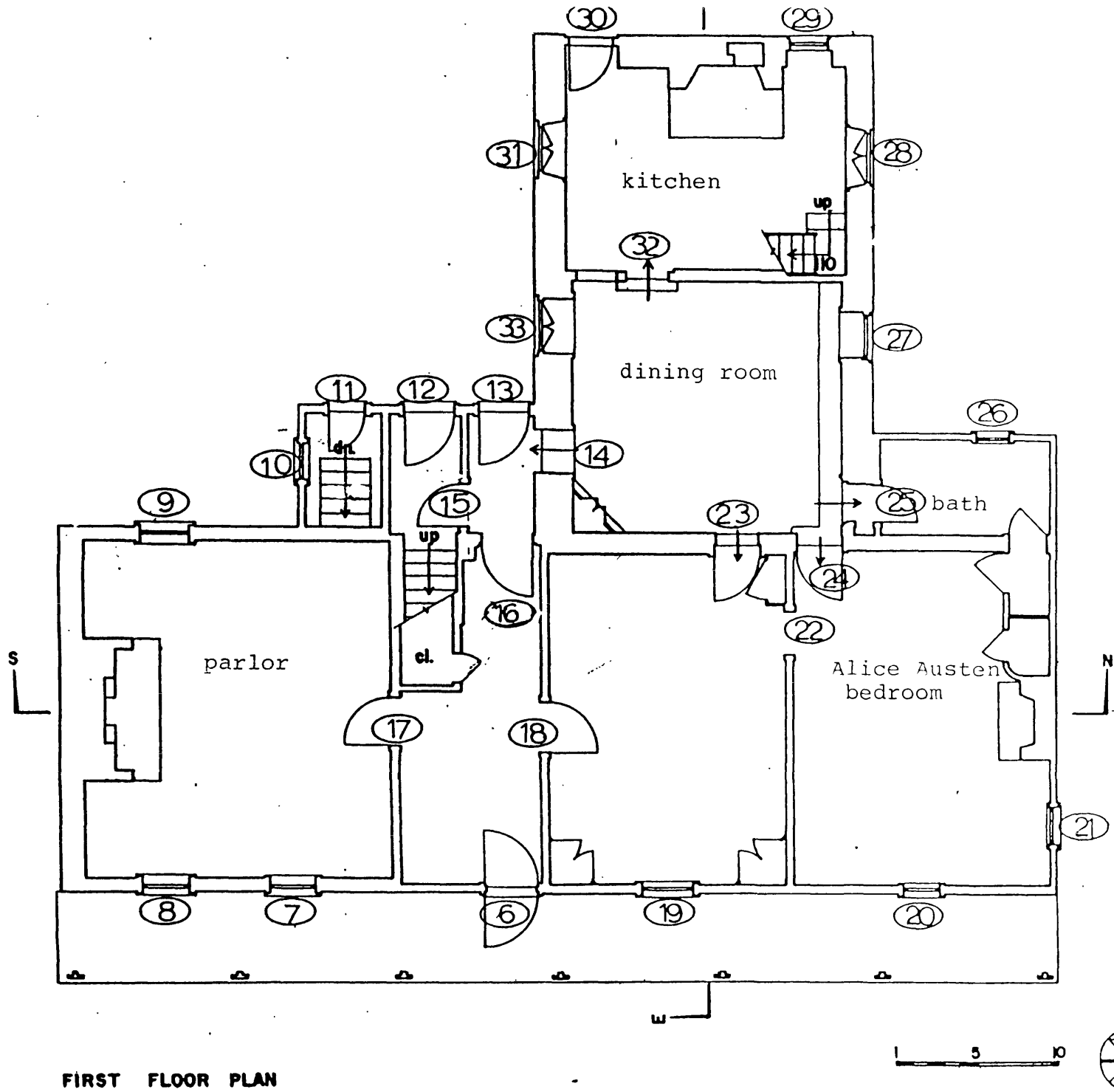


Figure 2.  
Basement plan



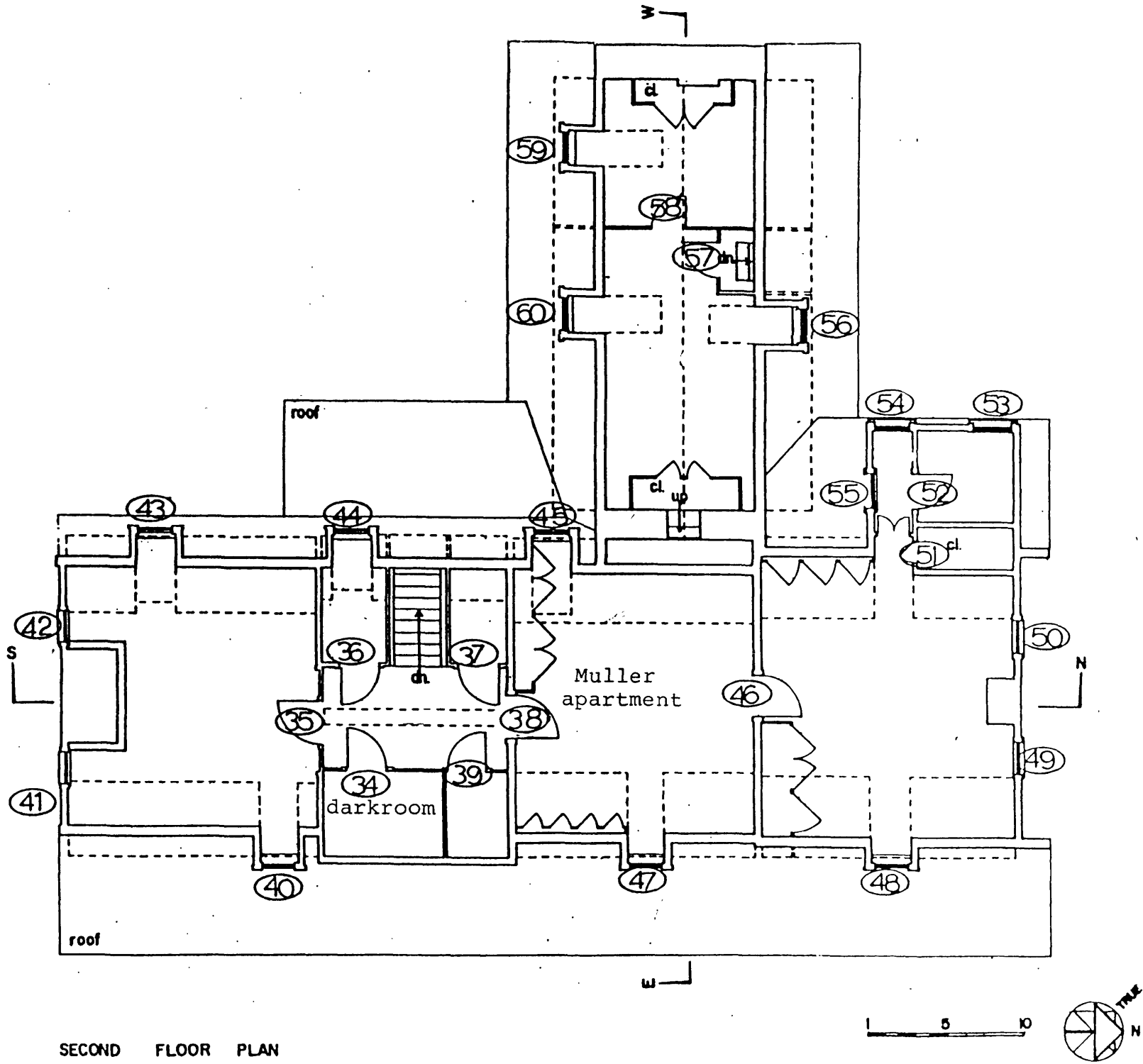
RAYMOND F. PAVIA Architect	ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE Staten Island, New York	MEASURED DRAWINGS	Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0" Date: Aug. 15, 1979
-------------------------------	---	-------------------	--

Figure 3.  
 First Floor Plan  
 Prior to restoration



RAYMOND F. PAVIA Architect	ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE Slaten Island, New York	MEASURED DRAWINGS	Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0" Date: Aug. 15, 1979
-------------------------------	---	-------------------	--

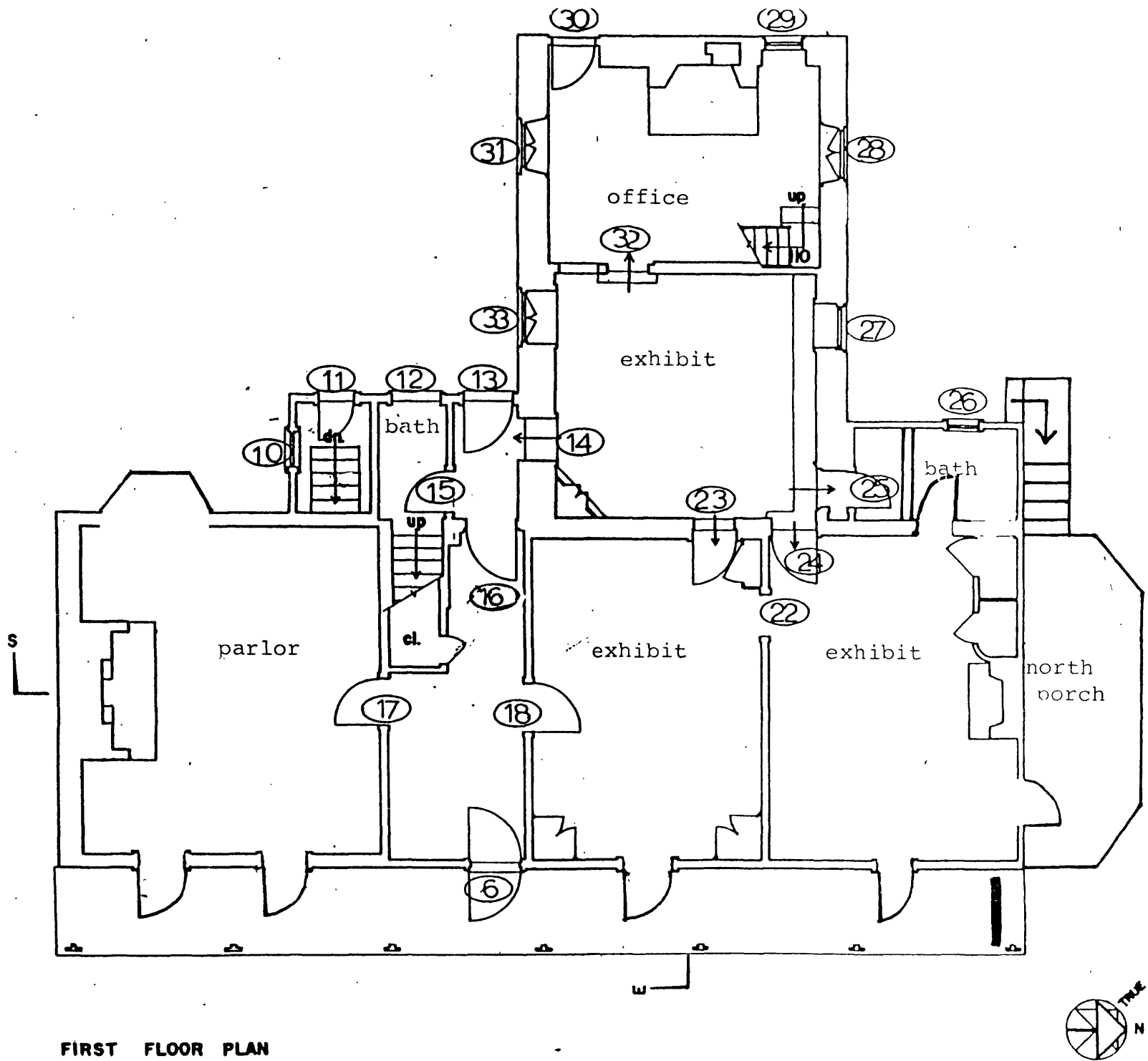
Figure 4.  
Second Floor Plan  
Prior to restoration



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

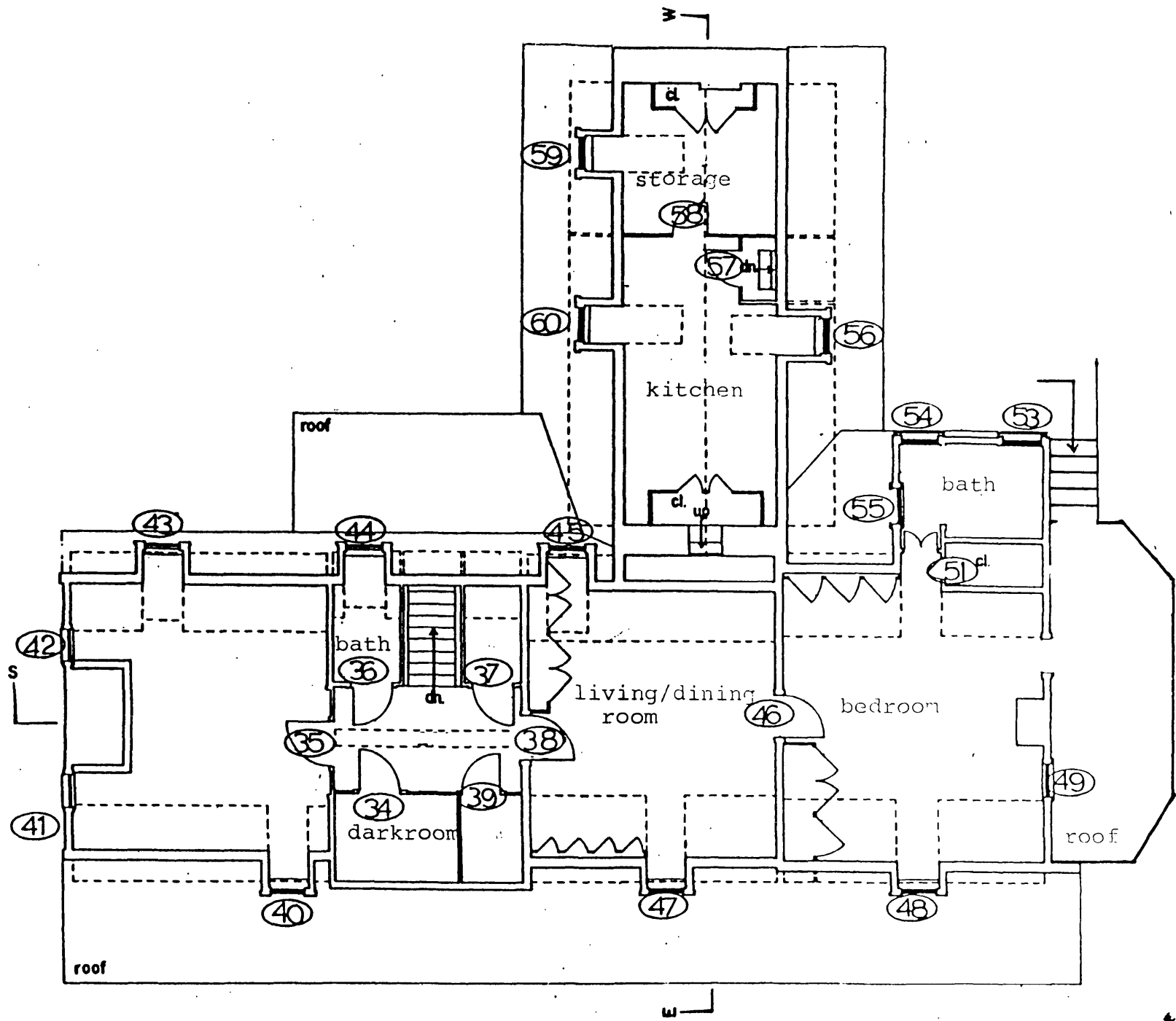
RAYMOND F. PAVIA Architect	ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE Staten Island, New York	MEASURED DRAWINGS	Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0" Date: Aug. 15, 1979
-------------------------------	---	-------------------	--

Figure 5.  
First Floor Plan  
Post-restoration



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Figure 6.  
Second Floor Plan  
Post-restoration



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 23**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## PHOTOGRAPH 1

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: front of house; facing west.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 1

## PHOTOGRAPH 2

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: southern facade; facing northwest.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 2

## PHOTOGRAPH 3

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: western facade; facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 3

## PHOTOGRAPH 4

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: west wing (Section C); facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 4

## PHOTOGRAPH 5

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: view of sections C, G, F; facing south.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 5

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 24**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## PHOTOGRAPH 6

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: north porch (Section F); facing south.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 6

## PHOTOGRAPH 7

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: view of Verrazano Narrows from front of house; facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 7

## PHOTOGRAPH 8

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, parlor showing built-in cabinets; facing south.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 8

## PHOTOGRAPH 9

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, parlor fireplace; facing south.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 9

## PHOTOGRAPH 10

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, parlor showing projecting bay window; facing west.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 10

**ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE****Page 25**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## PHOTOGRAPH 11

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, exhibit room showing built-in cabinets; facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 11

## PHOTOGRAPH 12

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, exhibit room showing built-in cabinets; facing north.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 12

## PHOTOGRAPH 13

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, former dining room showing "hole" in wall exhibiting original wall from Section A; facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 13

## PHOTOGRAPH 14

- 1) Name of Property: Alice Austen House
- 2) City and State: Staten Island, NY
- 3) Name of Photographer: Jill S. Mesirow
- 4) Date of Photograph: January 1992
- 5) Location of original negative: NCC, Washington, DC
- 6) Description of view indicating direction of camera: interior, Alice Austen's second floor darkroom; facing east.
- 7) Photograph number as keyed to the accompanying sketch map: 14