

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

1560

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Villa Bella Vista

other names/site Pierre, Eila, House; The Ledges

2. Location

street & number 7 Old Depot Road not for publication N/A

city or town Chester vicinity N/A

state Connecticut code CT county Middlesex code 007 zip code 06412

3. 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally . (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

John W. Shannahan October 27, 2000
Signature of certifying official Date
John W. Shannahan, Connecticut Historical Commission
Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Villa Bella Vista
Name of Property

Middlesex, CT
County and State

4. 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 the Keeper
Edson A. Ball

Date of Action
12/28/00

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)
count.)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the

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

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
DOMESTIC/single dwelling/secondary structure.

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
DOMESTIC/single dwelling/secondary structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
LATE VICTORIAN/Italian villa

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)
foundation Stone
walls Stone/stucco
roof Asphalt shingle
other _____

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Section 7 Page 1

Sited near the crest of a hill overlooking the Connecticut River to the east, Villa Bella Vista is a large two-story masonry house (70' x 33') built in 1908. Designed to resemble the stone houses of northern Italy, it has a three-story square tower at the northwest corner and a shallow hipped roof with deep overhangs (Photograph #s 1, 2, 3, 4). Constructed of load-bearing masonry with 18-inch stuccoed stone walls, the structure utilizes concrete floors carried on reinforced concrete beams. Internal load-bearing walls in the cellar were constructed with relieving brick barrel vaults.

The open sloping site, punctuated by mature trees and bordered by low stone walls, includes five acres on both sides of Old Depot Road in Chester (see site plan). A driveway swings in from the road southwest of the house and curves around to the rear to a gabled, stuccoed stone garage (20' x 33'), which is connected to the house by a tunnel from the cellar and a coped stone wall above grade (Photograph #5). A gabled shed is tucked into the corner of the wall next to the garage and another one is built up against the rear wall of the house.

Among the special features of the house is a large raised concrete piazza or terrace (18' x 42') along the east elevation. Except for a center section left open to the sky, the piazza is sheltered by vine-covered pergolas supported by cast-concrete columns (Photograph #6). For the semicircular section that extends out beyond the façade, pergola rafters radiate out from a central support column to the colonnade. The supporting stone wall below rests on an outcropping of rock ledge. A narrow columned pergola serves as a passageway from the terrace to the main entrance, which has a large rustic wooden door set within a segmental arched recess (Photograph #7). The doorway also is accessed directly from a short flight of steps in front. On the left is a circular bay window with a balcony. A second balcony is located above the terrace and a large fixed window with a three-pane transom set within a wide stone arc on the east (right) elevation (Photograph #8). Both balconies are sheltered by pergolas. French doors open onto the piazza and second-floor balconies. Those on the east balcony, which are surmounted by doubled pointed arches, are divided like Dutch doors. The top halves are glazed; the lower sections are solid wooden panels. A second stone-arched doorway is found at the base of the tower on the west elevation (Photograph #9). There are small round-arched windows under the tower eaves and oculus windows in its rear wall.

Most of the windows are the casement type with fixed transoms. They appear to be set within pointed-arched recesses, arranged singly or grouped in arcades of two or three, with dividing half-round pilasters. However, from the inside, the windows actually have rectangular transoms with geometric tracery that extend behind the arches.

Several changes to the design of the roof are recorded in historic photographs. As built, the original flat roof had a stone parapet, bordered by a wooden pent roof with deep overhangs, supported by outriggers with shaped ends. Remarkably, these overhangs were later retained or replicated in quite different roof configurations. The pent roof was left in place on the gable ends and became part of a new high gabled roof with dormers installed about 1915, which created an attic story. In 1940 the second owners returned the roof to its original parapeted flat-roof configuration. Despite their use of more modern roofing material on the deck, water penetration remained a problem, just as it was when the house was built. In 1980 the decision was made to install the present hip roof, with overhangs and exposed rafter tails that are quite faithful to the original design. Another change to the building was at the front south corner, where the second owner enclosed the shed-roofed open porch in the late 1920s, using salvaged stained-glass windows from the Berkley Divinity School in Middletown. The second-story addition for a bath above was added later.

The interior plan of the first floor consists of a large living room to the right of the foyer and a dining room and library (the former porch) on the left (see floor plan). The kitchen is located at the rear. In the living room, a large fieldstone fireplace with a round-arched opening on the west wall, flanked on the right by built-in bookcases (Photograph #10). The tiled floors there and in the rest of the house were installed over bare concrete by the second owners. Ceiling beams run longitudinally, with a single supporting column between the living room and the foyer. There is a full-width segmental-arched opening between the living room and the small space to the north that serves an entryway from the terrace.

Plain plaster walls are decorated with cast-plaster *bas reliefs* or small niches. One relief is located over the dining room fireplace, which has a shallow round-arched opening set within a plain plaster face, bordered by unusual yellow brick quoining (Photograph

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Section 7 Page 2

#11). Others are found over the door to the library and at the head of the stairs to the second floor. A thick hemp rope serves as a handrail for the stairs and a wrought-iron balustrade runs around the open second-floor stairwell.

Arched forms are repeated on the second floor, in the stair hall, passageways, and the four bedrooms. At the head of the stairs, round arches spring from a central supporting column; the hall beyond leads to the tower (Photograph #12). Winding stairs in the tower lead up to a large arched door, which once opened onto the roof terrace (Photograph #13). In the southwest bedroom (above the dining room), balcony doors have a demilune transom, and windows and passage doors are set within recessed arches (Photograph #14). The fireplaces there and in the southeast bedroom project from the walls and have rectangular openings, and plastered brick faces and chimney breasts (Photograph #15). A corner fireplace of painted brick in the northwest bedroom has an angled copper hood over the firebox (Photograph #16).

Villa Bella Vista
Name of Property

Middlesex, CT
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

B removed from its original location.

C a birthplace or grave.

D a cemetery.

E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

F a commemorative property.

G Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1908 -1940

Significant Dates

1908; c. 1920

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Eila Pierre (aka Ila Howland Stone)
Martin Lanzi

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: owner's archives

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Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Section 8 Page 1

Statement of Significance

A significant idiosyncratic expression of an Italian villa, Bella Vista was designed by the owner Eila Pierre. Madame Pierre, as she was known even to her intimates, was a turn-of-the-century feminist of independent means. Although not a professional architect, she drew the plans for this well-preserved stuccoed stone house, which was modeled on the indigenous farmhouse architecture of northern Italy and built by local Italian immigrant masons. Adapting the characteristic form, materials, and features of the villa to a New England hilltop site, Madame Pierre's creation makes the most of its spectacular river view location.

Historical Background

Today Madame Pierre would be known as liberated woman; in the village of Chester in early twentieth century, her unconventional life style was a scandal. She had come to Chester in 1900 as Ila Howland Stone (1870-1931), the new bride of the Reverend Dwight Stone (b. 1861), who had been appointed as minister of the Congregational Church. Stone, a Connecticut native who graduated from Yale in 1877, earlier had been associated with the Pilgrim Church in Canaan (1887-1892). Although Ila was born in Illinois, she had family in Hartford. Within two years, the Reverend Stone abruptly resigned from his post and subsequently filed for divorce. The uncontested divorce decree in 1906 named Franklin Tyler of Chester, the first of several of Ila's gentlemen friends, as correspondent.

Having cast off the bonds of marriage, Ila Stone recreated herself as Eila Pierre. Given that Pierre clearly was a well-educated woman of some sophistication with the resources to live anywhere in the world, that she remained in Chester and built her summer house there is difficult to understand under the circumstances. Divorce was scandalous enough in this period; for a minister's wife to be divorced was beyond the pale. For her to continue her affair with Tyler seemed to be a deliberate affront to small-town sensibilities and mores. No personal records have survived to provide clues to her motivations. Period photographs of Pierre present her as sweet-faced woman in unremarkable conventional dress, to modern eyes, hardly a *femme fatale*. As will be shown, although she continued to flout convention, some of her neighbors remembered her rather fondly even though they were well aware of her indiscretions.

Plans for Pierre's new house were already being considered in 1904, when she bought the land on Old Depot Road. In preparation for the design, she set off for an extended tour of northern Italy to survey Italian villas, taking with her Martin(i) Lanzi, a young local stone mason. Lanzi was one of a group of recent Italian immigrants in Chester who found work as stone masons and woodcutters. Most came from the northern Italy, where Lanzi was born. Pierre drew the plans in 1907 when she stayed at her brother-in-law's summer place on Grove Beach in Clinton, Connecticut.¹

At least five masons and laborers were employed during construction, including Martin Lanzi and his brother Antonio; later they both helped build Gillette Castle across the river, which was completed in 1919. The workmen lived on site in a crude stone hut built into the slope below the house, which is depicted in a historic photograph. Another photograph records the topping off ceremony with Madame Pierre, Gertrude Jagger, her lifetime companion, and the work crew standing on top of the front wall (see Figure 1). Miss Jagger was a Chester native; her family lived just across the street from the parsonage.

Madame Pierre lived in the Chester house on a seasonal basis until 1925, spending the winters in Florida at Smyrna Beach. Close ties were maintained the family of Martin Lanzi, who built his house across the street from the villa. The Lanzi children, who had the run of her house, have pleasant memories of parties, presents, and even dresses made by Pierre. They recall how Pierre traveled about in her Pope-Hartford touring car and entertained frequently, her soirees attended by Howland relatives from Hartford, as well as friends from around the state. Among them was Ernst Moore, industrialist and author on Africa. Upon learning that the house might be for sale in 1925, Moore promptly made an offer. He purchased the property from Jagger, who had owned the property since 1916.²

¹ A full set of plans annotated in Pierre's handwriting are in the possession of the Moore family.

² There were several land transfers recorded between Jagger and Ila Stone soon after the house was built, apparently to legalize Pierre's ownership in her new name.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Section 8 Page 2

Madame Pierre became ill shortly after she and Miss Jagger had moved across the street. Diagnosed with cancer, Pierre died in Hartford Hospital in 1931. Villa Bella Vista has remained in the Moore family ever since. It was inherited by Richard W. Moore, who lives with his wife in Paris and returns to Chester every May and October.

Architectural Significance

In the design of her house, Madame Pierre exhibited the same independent and romantic spirit that animated her unconventional life. While her contemporaries were embracing the Queen Anne or the Colonial Revival styles, it appears that Pierre, having as little regard for fashion as she did for public opinion, chose an outdated style that was popular some 50 years earlier. While certainly an anomalous design, one that does not fall neatly into the stylistic time frames developed by architectural historians, Villa Bella Vista was not simply derivative. Superficially of course, it recalls the rural "cottages in the villa style" popularized in the mid-nineteenth century by Alexander Jackson Downing, or in Connecticut, the villas done by Henry Austin. While Pierre's design was not based on the work of these architects, she clearly shared their view that an Italian farmhouse of the *Alto Adige* was well suited as a model for an American country house. However, unlike the period architecture of the picturesque that was often embellished with elaborate detailing, Villa Bella Vista was deliberately rustic and relatively unadorned. In fact, upon closer analysis it becomes evident that instead of a revival of the outmoded Villa style, the design of Pierre's house was a relatively literal recreation of indigenous rural Italian architecture.

As the evolution of Pierre's design shows, what she brought back from Italy was a clear understanding of the essential elements and massing of the villa form. The campanile, or tower, the colonnaded piazza, and stone masonry define the Latin prototype. Her sure sense of proportion is exhibited in the asymmetrical balance achieved between the thrusting vertical of the tower and the solid mass of the house. The campanile, so characteristic of the hill country, had evolved from the free-standing medieval watchtowers around which farmhouses were assembled over centuries. When no longer needed for protection, such towers often served as granaries.

There is a timeless quality to Villa Bella Vista, the name bestowed by Madame Pierre. Although trees have matured and partially obscure the view of the river, they shelter the house and contribute to the organic harmony of the setting. The hand of the designer is evident in the siting and arrangement of the complex, which, in its totality, echoes the evolution of the Italian farmhouse and its dependencies. The siting of the house itself was a considerable challenge. Although obviously located at the highest point to take full advantage of the river view, Bella Vista appears to nestle into the hillside, an effect enhanced by the liberal use of foliage and stone. By incorporating exposed rock ledges into her design, Pierre anchored the considerable mass of the house and emphasized its organic nature. Such a device is particularly effective where the stone foundation of the piazza seems to grow out of the natural ledge below (Photograph #6). The vine-covered pergolas (wisteria is used here) that Pierre employed are as picturesque in their Chester context as they are in Italy, where these structures adorn terraces of restaurants and wineshops, as well as houses. If Bella Vista had been designed for year-round use, solid roofs might have been employed for terraces and balconies, but for a place only enjoyed in the warmer months, such leafy bowers were ideal and further integrate the house with its setting.

The simplicity of the interior design and finishes--plaster walls relieved only by *bas reliefs* or arched forms--also suggests the Italian influence. As shown by the plans, all the interior features were built as originally designed and fully detailed on the plans. The fireplace in the dining room, for example, was shown in plan and elevation and dimensioned right down to the size of the chimney throat. It is the fireplaces on the second floor, however, that most resemble their Italian counterparts (Photograph #s 15, 16). Their plain plastered brick, angled chimney breasts, and even the copper hood are all features of a typical farmhouse kitchen hearth.

Although the design appears to be wholly her own, Pierre consulted with experts and Franklin Tyler helped supervise construction. Albert Turner, owner of the New England Lime Company of Canaan, provided technical information about the use of concrete and detail sections for reinforcement of beams and floors, as well as plans for the concrete forms. One of the forms used for the pergola columns, which were cast in place, remains in the cellar. It was used a model when several columns damaged during the hurricane of

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Section 8 Page 3

1938 had to be replaced.³ There are no extant plans showing the brick arches and vaults in the cellar, suggesting that Lanzi also had a hand in the structural design. But it is the stonework that was Lanzi's major contribution. Although much of his masonry is covered with stucco or vines, several carefully constructed keystone arches demonstrate his skill: above the door at the base of the tower and the very broad arch that defines the first story of the northeast elevation, which is a *tour de force*.

While the house was designed with modern plumbing, there was no electrical system at time of construction. One had been installed by 1926, when the Moores came here, but, because of the solid masonry construction, there was no attempt at concealment. As was customary for masonry houses both here and abroad, after rural electrification wiring simply was run over walls and ceilings. Like the tiling of bare concrete floors, the present electrical system with hidden wiring adds to the ambience of the interior. These improvements, along with the addition of the present stylistically compatible roof, are fully in keeping with the spirit of Pierre's original concept.

In summary, Villa Bella Vista reflects the personality of an unusual independent woman. Her success in transplanting a Latin farmhouse to American soil demonstrates not only her intuitive knowledge of design but her innate understanding of well-established architectural principles; truthfulness of structure, form, and materials, selected to be in harmony with the rural landscape.

³Although Turner may have not have envisioned a hurricane, he had warned Pierre that the columns were not engineered to withstand lateral force.

Villa Bella Vista
Name of Property

Middlesex, CT
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 5

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>18</u>	<u>713910</u>	<u>4586480</u>	3	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____

_____ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By: _____ **Reviewed by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator**

name/title Jan Cunningham, National Register Consultant

organization Cunningham Preservation Associates date 3/30/00

street & number 37 Orange Road telephone (860) 347 4072

city or town Middletown state CT zip code 06457

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Moore, Christopher, David, & Nicholas Mail c/o Christopher Moore

street & number 7 Old Depot Road telephone (860) 526 9113 or (212) 688 6544

city or town Chester state CT zip code 06412

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

(8-86)

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Villa Bella Vista, Deep River, Middlesex County, CT

Section 9/10 Page 1

9. Major Bibliographic References

Barzini, Luigi. *The Italians*. New York: Athenum, Macmillian Publishing Company, 1964.

Downing, Alexander Jackson. *Victorian Cottage Residences*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981. Reprint 1850 edition.

McAlester, Virginia & Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985.

Moore, Richard W. Villa Bella Vista Archives. Collection of documents, architectural plans, and historic photographs.

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property is described in the Chester Land Records in Volume 93, Pages 793-795, and the boundaries are shown on the attached site map drawn to scale from Chester Tax Assessor's maps.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries are drawn along property lines to encompass all the land and buildings associated with Villa Bella Vista during its period of significance.

(8-86)

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Villa Bella Vista, Chester, Middlesex County, CT

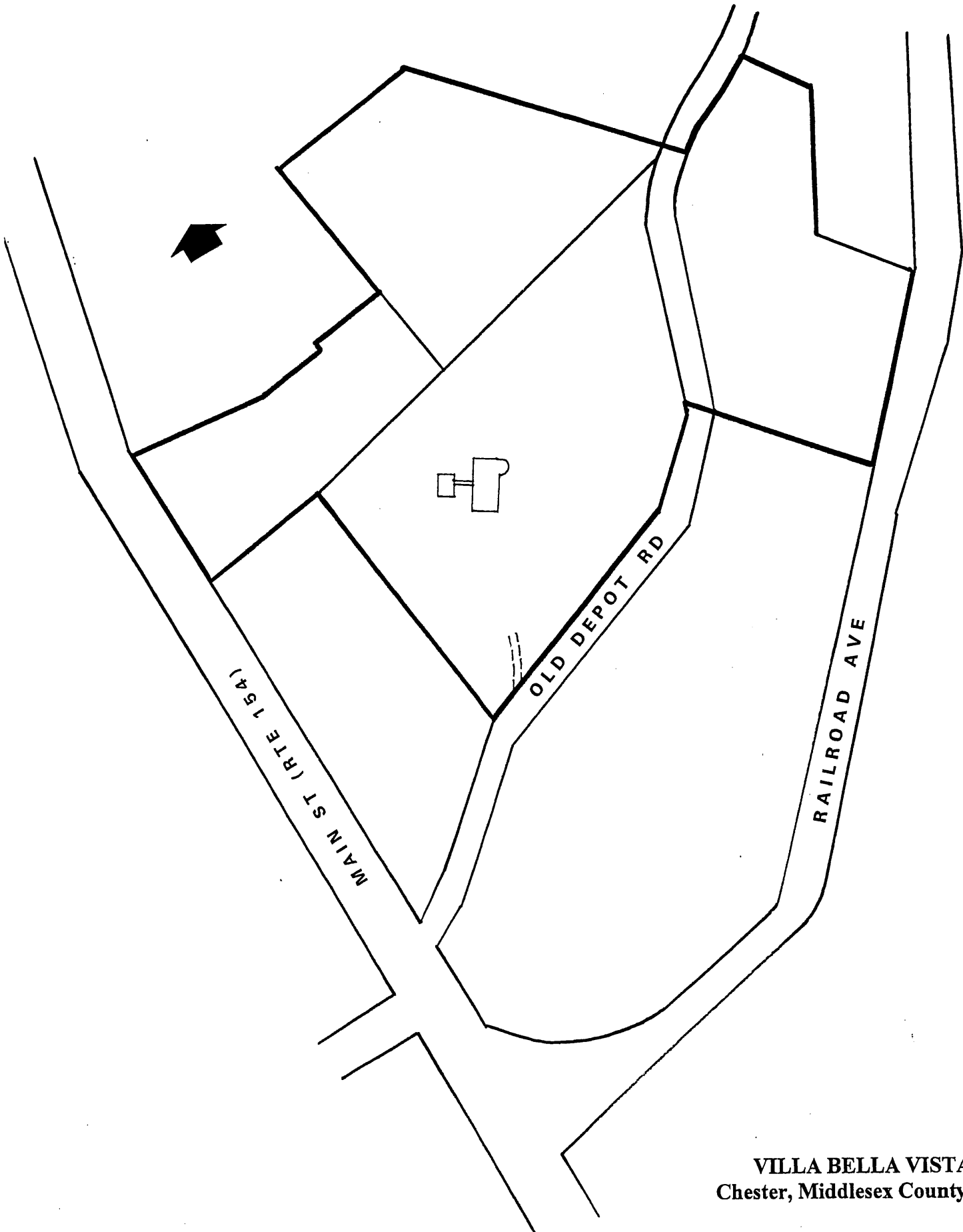
Section: Photo Page 1

List of Photographs

Photographer: Cunningham Preservation Associates Negatives on File: Connecticut Historical Commission

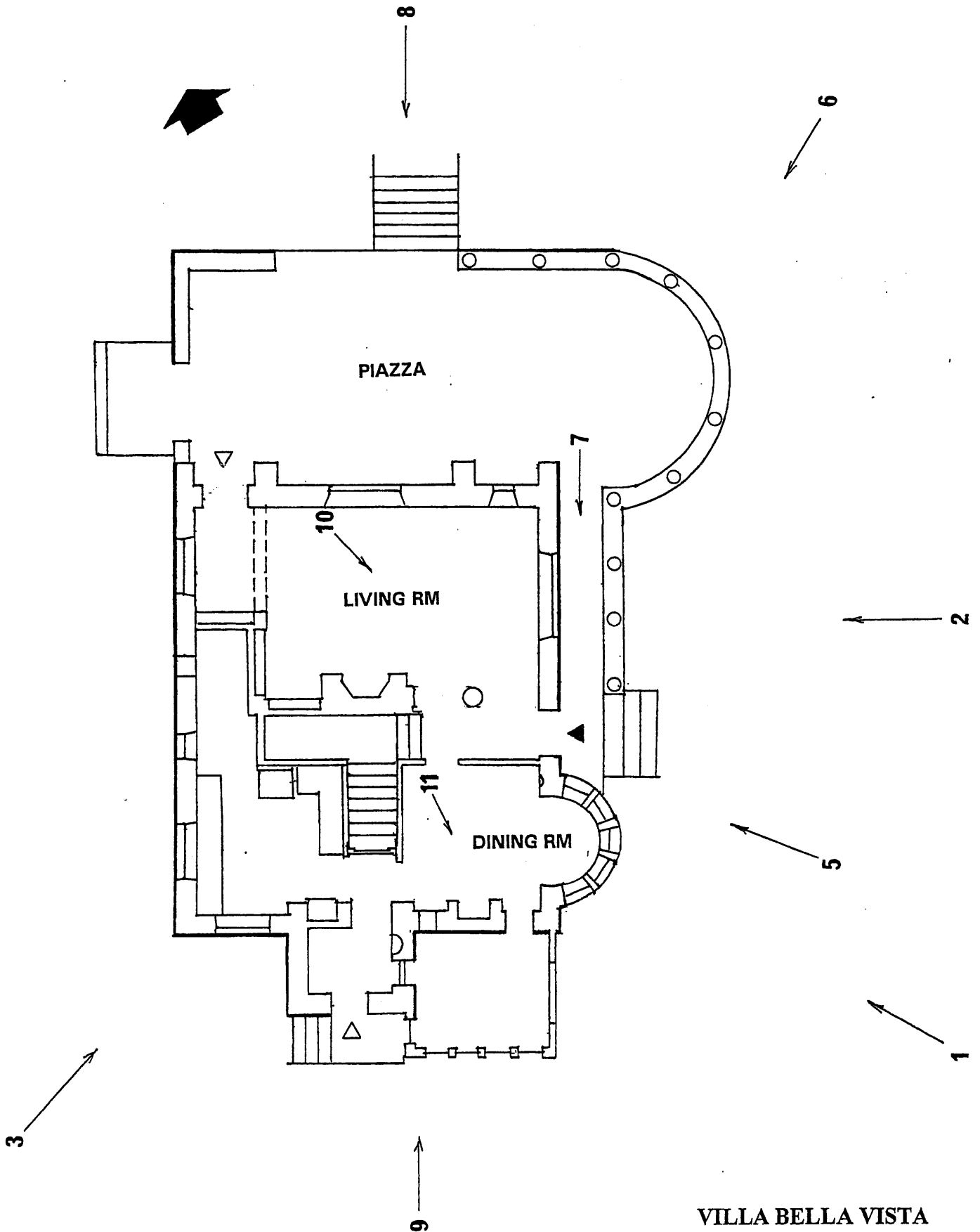
Dates: 10/99 and 4/00

1. General view, camera facing N
 2. Façade, camera facing NW
 3. Rear and southwest elevations, camera facing SE
 4. Garage and connecting wall, camera facing NE
 5. Facade close up, camera facing N
 6. Pergola, camera facing NW
 7. Colonnade between pergola and front door, camera facing SW
 8. Northeast elevation, camera facing SW
 9. Southwest elevation, camera facing NE
 10. Living room, camera facing SW
 11. Dining room, camera facing SW
 12. Upper hall, camera facing SW
 13. Stairs to tower, camera facing W
 14. Southwest bedroom, camera facing SW
 15. Northeast bedroom, camera facing NE
 16. Northwest bedroom, camera facing W
-



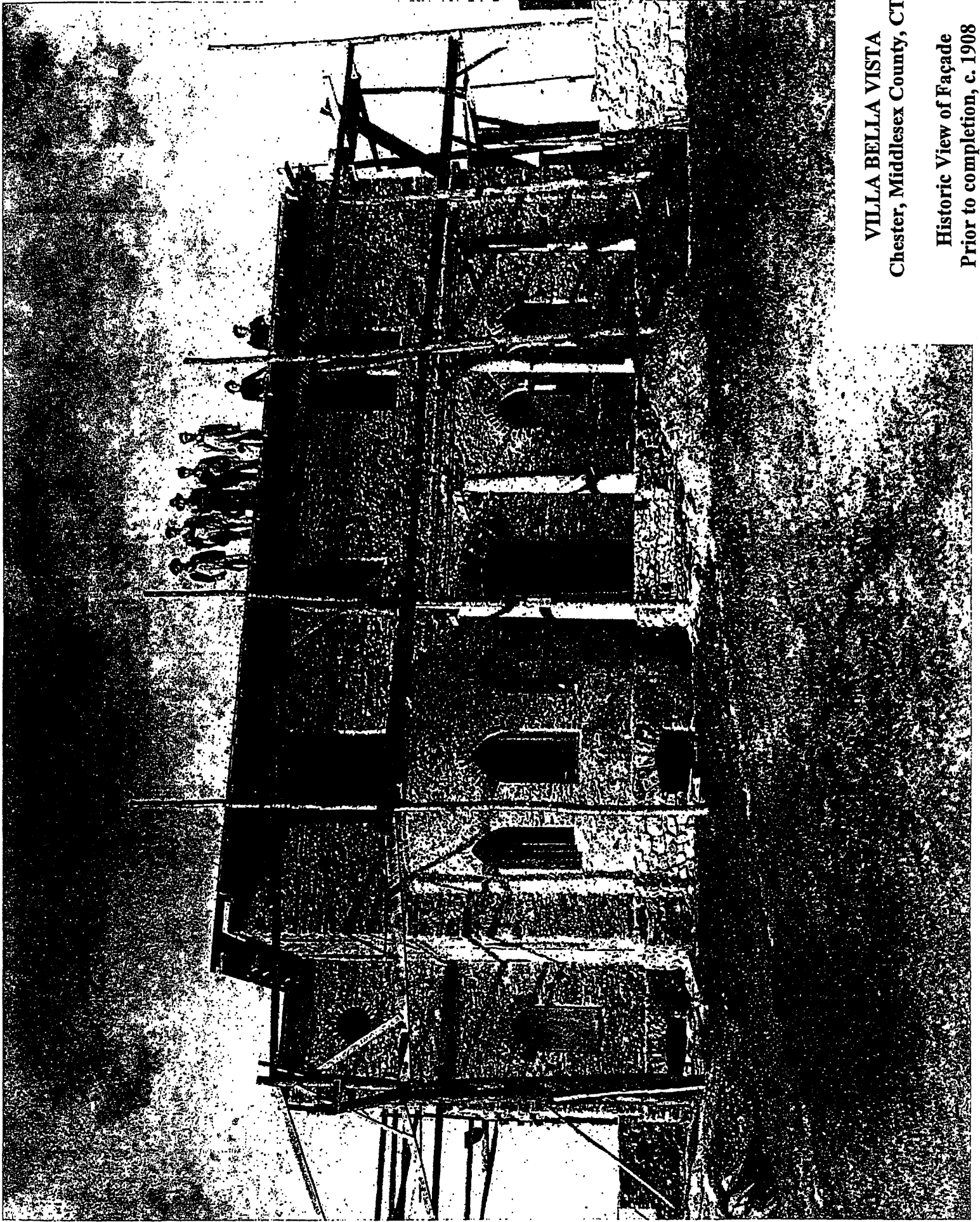
VILLA BELLA VISTA
Chester, Middlesex County, CT

SITE PLAN
Approximate Scale: 1" = 120'
National Register Boundary in Bold



VILLA BELLA VISTA
 Chester, Middlesex County, CT

FIRST FLOOR PLAN
 Approximate Scale: 3/32" = 1'
 Photograph views indicated by arrows



VILLA BELLA VISTA
Chester, Middlesex County, CT

Historic View of Façade
Prior to completion, c. 1908