UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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Connecticut

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NAME Dr. Steven	S. Wernick			·
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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

William E. Sessions' elegant brownstone mansion occupies a prominent site on Federal Hill in the heart of Bristol, Connecticut. The house faces west on Bellevue Avenue, the showplace of a neighborhood that once had many fine homes. Some of the surrounding houses have now been demolished and replaced, for example, by a four-story nursing home directly across the street, others have been put to commercial purposes such as funeral homes, and others have been cut up into apartments, but Beleden maintains its polished presence today as it did when it was built in 1908, a reminder of an affluent age.

The Beaux-Arts Classicism of the front facade is dominated by the central, two-story, half-round, Ionic, tetrastyle portico (Photograph 1). The tall, round, white marble columns have elaborate capitals with swags that connect the volutes. Each swag has a central pineapple and the volutes have pineapple pendants. The columns support an equally elaborate white marble entablature. A thin egg-and-dart ovolo molding defines the architrave; a medium egg-and-dart molding separates the architrave from the plain frieze, and the cornice consists of a heavy egg-and-dart molding, modillion blocks and a cyma recta crown molding. Classic revival trim of this quality and description is used profusely throughout the exterior and interior of Beleden.

The stone floor of the portico, formerly tile, is approached by halfround front steps with low risers and extends as a terrace to the left and
right across the front of the house where it is protected by a brownstone
balustrade similar to the balustrade that crowns the portico. The central
doorway has an architrave with an egg-and-dart molding carved in the brownstone, a pulvinated frieze, and a flat cornice. The two-leaf doors have vertical, oblong glazing surrounded by egg-and-dart moldings, and there is a
wrought-iron balcony above the entrance.

Two pairs of French doors at first floor level, left and right of the portico, open onto the terrace. At the second floor level there are two pairs of rectangular windows on the right. At the second floor on the left the windows are large single openings with half-round heads under molded drip stones whose imposts are the capitals of flanking two-story pilasters. This arrangement gives an upward thrust on this side of the house, combining the two floors in an indication that the interior is a single, high room. The windows on both sides of the portico are separated vertically from the French doors below by oblong panels carved with a double swag in high relief. All of the window trim and the wall itself are brownstone.

The hipped roof with medium overhang is covered with flat, red, terra cotta tiles. Peaks and junctions of planes are embellished with bronze pineapple finials. The cornice of the portico continues around the house under the copper eaves. There are pilasters at the corners of the house that repeat the Ionic capitals of the portico, complete with swags and pineapple pendants.

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The plan of the house is U-shaped, with an additional wing to the north for service (see sketch). On the garden elevation the inside base of the U is devoted to the palm court (Photograph 2). The palm court's exterior wall is an arcade of half-round arches over French doors leading to a broad terrace with balustrade. There are three tripartite windows in the rear second story wall over the court, additional windows in the arms of the U, and a bank of four windows in a dormer at third floor level, to light the attic.

On the south elevation the side door, approached by a circular drive, is protected by a large iron marquise that is embellished with cast-iron acroteria (Photograph 3). The door is flanked by brownstone pilasters, iron wall lamps with round, glass shades, and oval windows with molded brownstone surrounds, Paired, rectangular, one-over-one windows are centered above in the second story and additional rectangular one-over-one windows fill out the elevation. Two oblong chimneys with molded tops rise from this end wall. A corresponding pair of chimneys is located at the other end of the house, and the service wing has three more chimneys.

The north elevation, to the service wing, is a smooth, flat wall, the only such surface on the exterior of the house (Photograph 4). Its central feature is a large, round-arched, recessed opening with keystone leading to the back door. The approach to the doorway is through a high, brownstone fence that has unusually high and large square brownstone posts. This elevation of the house has quoins at the corners.

The present grounds of Beleden are the front part of the original estate. The grounds are separated from the street by a high wrought iron fence on a brownstone base that has hollow square posts fashioned of wrought iron, and elaborate wrought-iron C- and S-curve gates. In the back the garden elevation terrace overlooks a swimming pool. Beyond the swimming pool there is a semi-elliptical stone bench that now marks the end of the property, but once marked the beginning of extensive gardens with several outbuildings. There is a large, 26 by 44 foot sunken brick court at the northeast corner of the house accessible only from the basement (Photograph 14). This area was the drying court; it provided a place to dry the wash without it being generally visible. (See landscaping plan.)

Beleden's floor plans are based on a central hall and transverse hall. The wide central hall runs from the front door to the palm court, while the narrower but longer transverse hall runs from the side door north past the palm court to the dining room which occupies the north arm of the U. The central hall has Corinthian pilasters, a pink Tenessee marble floor, and a Pavonazza marble dado. The principal room of the house, the music room, opens

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to the left from the central hall. It is a two-story space, focused on the three-manual Estey pipe organ whose gilded front pipes are on the north wall. There is a wood cherub at the top of this front with its arms positioned to hold a harp, that unfortunately is missing (Photograph 5). The tonal pipes occupy space in back, extending up through the second floor to the attic. The walls of the room are decorated with panels formed by raised acanthus leaf carving edged with egg-and-dart moldings. Between the articulated beams of the ceiling there are three rosettes, two of which are openings to echo chambers in the attic, for the organ. In the south end of the music room, at second floor level, there is a balcony, with semi-elliptical-shaped front and two rows of chairs, for seating those who listen to the music (Photograph 6). There are two paintings by Vesper George, the Boston artist, on the walls, commissioned for this room. One is a portrait of William K. Sessions, and the other a mural on canvas of a scene in ancient Greece suitably entitled "Poetry and Music."

The dining room is the room across the transverse hall from the music room, in the north arm of the U. It is divided into two sections by ascreen of two fluted Ionic columns that have capitals like the portico columns, and there are Ionic pilasters along the walls. With the help of velvet curtains for which the track is still in place, the dining room could be reduced in size for family use. French doors give access to the garden terrace for summer meals. The beamed ceiling of the dining room is entirely gilded, and then painted in turquoise in a floral and foliate pattern.

To the right of the central hall, inside the front door, there originally was a formal reception room leading to a study. These two rooms were joined together in the mid-20th century to form a single, larger living room with dropped ceiling and pine-panelled dado and fireplace surround.

The library is across the transverse hall from the living room, in the south arm of the U. It is a dark room, dominated by bookcases and a high wainscotting in Honduras mahogany. The fireplace is faced with Egyptian black and gold marble, and the fireplace surround is continued in the dark mahogany. The walls above the wainscotting are covered in fabric on which a design is stencilled, picked out in gold leaf against a dark blue background. The design includes profiles of famous authors, including Tennyson, Holmes, Longfellow, Dickens, Emerson, Irving, and Scott.

The palm court is entered from the transverse hall at the center of the house, behind the central hall. Its floor is tile and its ceiling is lattice-like under the wire-glass panels. The walls of the palm court have ten wall sconces with paired Tiffany shades (Photograph 7).

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Stairs to the second floor rise against the west wall of the south part of the transverse hall in a long run south to a landing and then in a short run east to the second floor hall (Photograph 8). The stairway has a mahogany balustrade with three spiral balusters per tred, and pineapple finials on the newel posts. A panelled and molded dado on the wall echos the profile of the balustrade. The hall at the top of the stairs runs north-south over the first floor transverse hall. The view from the upstairs hall out over the palm court to the garden is one of the pleasant attributes of the house.

A doorway opens from the hall to the gallery of the music room. Because this room is a two-story space, there are only four bedrooms, all airy and well lighted, one over the library, another over the dining room, a third over the central hall, and the fourth in the southwest corner. The two bedrooms in the arms of the U, over the library and the dining room, are similarly arranged. Each has French doors opening onto a wrought-iron balcony overlooking the garden, and each has a fireplace with marble facing and with a mantel elaborately carved with swags and cherubs in the manner of Robert Adam, the 18th-century Scottish architect (Photograph 9).

The frame of the house is constructed of steel beams and the floors are concrete. The roof construction is the same, as is visible in the attic (Photograph 10). Interior partitions are terra cotta tile. As the exterior walls are stone and the roof is covered with tile, the interior trim is the only element in the house that will support combustion. The exterior walls are Kibbe brownstone, a hard red stone from East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, not the usual brownstone that is comparatively soft.

When it was built the house was equipped with the latest mechanical devices, including an ice making machine, water filtration system, central vacuuming system (the motor for which is still in place), individual heat controls for each room, and a telephone in each room and each outbuilding.

The landscaping plan for Beleden, attached, shows the full extent of the property at the time the house was built in 1908. The boundary of the land that still goes with the house, as shown on the landscaping plan, is the boundary of the nominated property. The back of the original estate has been developed. A north-south street parallel to Bellevue Avenue now bisects the former estate just west of the semi-elliptical bench. Modest mid-20th-century houses have been built on the east side of the street. The lodge and gardener's house shown on the landscaping plan remain standing. The lodge is a gabled, ruble stone cottage with red tile roof, while the gardener's house is a half-timbered Tudor Revival style house. As they are

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now separated from Beleden by a street and modern development, the lodge and gardeners house are not included in the nomination.

1. The central glazing of these windows is one-over-one sash, the upper member having a half-round head. This unit is surrounded by a narrow band of glazing in a pattern that alternates circles with concave-sided diamonds.

SPECIFIC DATES 1908-1910		Æ&KÆ ØARCI	HITECT Samuel J.	Brown
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Beleden is a handsome and opulent mansion designed in the dominant turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts style modified by its Georgian Revival portico and the Mediterranean influence in its garden front to become one of the great expressions of domestic architecture in central Connecticut (Criterion C).

The two men responsible for Beleden were Samuel J. Brown, the architect, and William E. Sessions, the owner. Beleden in 1908 came toward the end of both men's careers; Brown retired in 1917 and Session died in 1920. For both, the sophistication, elegance, and high artistic quality of Beleden was a bench mark in long lives of good, solid work but not, before Beleden of outstanding artistic achievement. Brown was a well trained, competent practitioner in the field of architecture whose Boston-based practice included commissions for a number of substantial homes in New England, but they were not of the unusually high quality of Beleden. Sessions was a local citizen, highly successful in manufacturing and banking, for whom Beleden, in its prime location close to downtown, was tangible evidence of his position as a financial and civic leader. By the time the two men came together, Brown was experienced, capable, and ready to design the finest house of his career. Sessions was ready to have him do it.

The basis for the design chosen by Brown was the approach to architecture espoused by the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris had an unrivalled reputation as a school of architecture in the 19th century, After Richard Morris Hunt and Henry Hobson Richardson blazed the trail by becoming the first Americans to enroll at the Ecole, a stream of students in architecture from the United States attended the school. Its precepts dominated the design of buildings at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and for the ensuing two decades or more Beaux Arts Classicism was the most widely accepted architectural style in America. Ecole des Beaux Arts teaching emphasized symmetrical plans with clearly articulated parts disposed around a central feature, with major and minor axes and with sculpture in relief and, at the skyline, in the round. All these elements are present in Beleden in the U-shaped plan, central portico, central and transverse halls, carved brownstone double swags, and bronze pineapple roof finials. As the Beaux Arts style was in the grand manner it mainly was used for large public buildings. At Beleden it is adopted for domestic purposes with Georgian Revival elements of Ionic portico, hipped roof, and compact massing. On the garden front the tile roof of medium overhang, arcaded wall of the palm court, and broad terrace with balustrade reflect a Mediterranean influence that is well integrated into the design as a whole.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheet.



10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA						
ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1.7 Bristol	1.2 0000					
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11 FORM PREPARED BY NAME / TITLE	: :					
David F. Ransom						
ORGANIZATION Architectural Historian	October 14, 1979					
STREET & NUMBER 33 Sunrise Hill Drive	TELEPHONE 203 521-2518					
CITY OR TOWN West Hartford,	CT 06107					
12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION C	OFFICER CERTIFICATION					
THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS	S PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:					
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As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the Nation hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Regis criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.						
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TITLE Director, Connecticut Historical Comm	nission DATE February 2, 1982					
FOR NPS USE ONLY						
HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER Entered in the						
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CHIEF OF REGISTRATION						

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The architect of Beleden, Samuel J. Brown (1853-1926), was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and came to Boston at age 18 to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture that had been formed in 1866 by Professor William R. Ware. After graduating in 1874, Brown joined the office of Ware and Van Brunt, the Boston architectural firm headed by the professor. This continued association indicates that Ware held a high opinion of Brown's talents. Brown was associated with the firm at about the time Ware and Van Brunt were starting work on their most famous commission, Harvard's Memorial Hall (1876-80). Thereafter, he joined the office of Cummings and Sears who carried on a large, diversified practice in Boston that included the design of important homes. Brown then worked for several years in the office of the City Architect of Boston before starting his own independent practice of primarily residential work in and around Boston, that continued until his retirement in 1917.

Twelve structures designed by Samuel J. Brown, in addition to Beleden, have been identified, all of them residences except one. Pictures of six were published by the <u>American Architect and Building News</u>, and six more are listed in a card file maintained by the Art and Architecture Department of the Boston Public Library.

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At the time Beleden was built, the house was the frontispiece for a large estate that required the services of a staff of 18 people for operation and maintenance. The original layout of the grounds is shown by the plot plan attached. The grounds included a sunken, formal garden, a picturesque English garden, pergola, pool, greenhouses, grape arbors, vegetable garden, coachman's lodge, and gardener's cottage. The land already was owned by the Sessions family, who lived in the house next door, still standing, that shows in the plot plan. Most of the acreage was sold some years ago for construction of modest houses.

The patron, William E. Sessions (1857-1920), was born in Bristol and in 1876 graduated from Hartford Public High School. He worked for three years with his father and brother in a trunk hardware manufacturing business in Bristol, and then in 1879, with the financial help of his father, bought a local job foundry which he renamed the Sessions Foundry Company. The business prospered, moved to new and larger quarters in the town, and provided the base for other successful enterprises. One of these took shape in the turn of the century when the Welch Company in nearby Forestville, a clock manufacturer, fell upon hard times. The Sessions family bought the company, reorganized it under the name of Sessions Clock Company, and operated it for many years. William E. Sessions also organized the Bristol Trust Company, and was a trustee of Wesleyan University.

The landscape architect for Beleden was Ernest W. Bowditch of Boston, the contractor was the Central Building Company of Worcester, Massachusetts, the interior woodwork was by Irving and Casson of Boston, and the interior decorators were Mortensen and Holdensen of Boston. The brownstone and marbles were furnished by Norcross Brothers of Worcester.

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In assessing the significance of Samuel J. Brown and Beleden, it probably is safe to say that Beleden is more important to Bristol than Samuel J. Brown is to the history of American architecture. Brown was well trained, worked with good firms before opening his own office, and surely he was highly competent. The breadth of his practice was limited to residences, of which all the known examples are substantial and expensive. He gave his clients designs to meet the changing fashions of the time, working as need be in the Stick, Chateauesque, Gothic Revival, Romanesque Revival and Neo-Classic Revival styles, but he did not achieve national recognition. The lack of national recognition is indicated by the fact that he was a member of the American Institute of Architects, not a fellow, and he was not included in Who's Who in New England.

At Beleden, toward the end of his career, it appears that he found a client who called for an outstanding achievement. Unfortunately, nothing is known of the relationship between William E. Sessions and Samuel J. Brown, but the results speak for themselves. The superbly proportioned brownstone mansion executed with no expense spared for materials and craftsmanship on both the exterior and interior, is a monument to both men. It is the keystone to architectural interest on Federal Hill in Bristol.

- 1. Obituary, Boston Evening Transcript, April 5, 1926.
- 2. The published structures are the following:
- E. S. Philbrick House, Newport, Rhode Island (demolished), American Architect and Building News, v. 1 (August 26, 1876) np, a stark early Stick style house.
- A. N. Belding House, 57 Talcott Avenue, Rockville, Connecticut (Photograph 11), Inland Architect and News Record, v. 19 (February, 1892). A chateauesque/Neo-Classical Revival design, it now serves as the synagogue of Congregation B'Nai Israel. A house of similar design stands in Rockville at the head of the green.

Two houses for the Newton Land Company, Newtonville, Massachusetts, AABN, v. 54 (November 21, 1896), np, are symmetrical compositions of stone and shingles with bays and porches.

Frankford Trull House, Woburn, Massachusetts, <u>AABN</u>, v. 56 (June 26, 1897) np, has a high hipped roof and one-story, columned, half-round, central portico, foreshadowing Beleden (Figure 12).

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Car House and Restaurant for the Commonwealth Avenue Street Railway at Norumbega Park, Auburndale, Massachusetts, AABN, v. 57 (July 17, 1897) np, (Figure 13), The purpose of the building apparently was to encourage a day's outing of riding the cars to the end of the line and dining at the restaurant.

3. The houses, all in the Boston vicinity, noted by the Boston Public Library file are the following:

Samuel N. Davenport, Mansfield St., Allston, C. 1888.

Edward Lynch, Ashmont, c. 1888.

Annie M. Clark, Glen Ave. (near Harvard St.) Dorchester, c. 1889.

J. R. Nichols, Roxbury, c. 1890.

Mrs. Gertrude A. Brewster, Wales St., Dorchester, c. 1890.

H. K. Appleton, Wentworth St., Allston, c. 1890.

- 4. Irving and Casson, "specialists in interior woodwork and mantels," merged in 1916 with A. H. Davenport & Company, the leading furniture manufacturing firm of the day. See Anne Farnam, "A. H. Davenport and Company, Boston Furniture Makes."
- 5. Norcross Brothers were contractors for much of H. H. Richardson's work. See James F. O'Gorman, Selected Drawings: H. H. Richardson and His Office.

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Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathbun Withey, <u>Biographical Dictionary</u> of American Architects (<u>Deceased</u>), Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970, reprint of 1956.

Anne Farnam, "A.H. Davenport and Company," Antiques, v. 109 (May, 1976), pp. 1048-1051.

James F. O'Gorman, <u>Selected Drawings: H.H. Richardson and His Office.</u>

<u>A Centennial of His Move to Boston, 1874.</u> Boston: David Godine, 1975.

Beleden Bristol, CT Figure 12



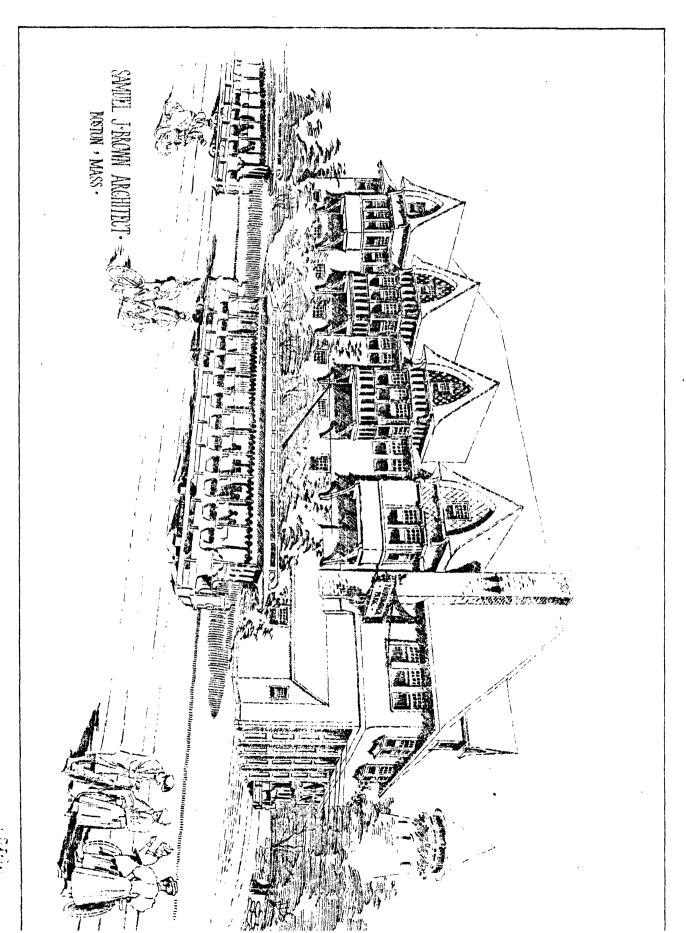
Mo. 1122. American Architect and Building Rews, June 26 1897.

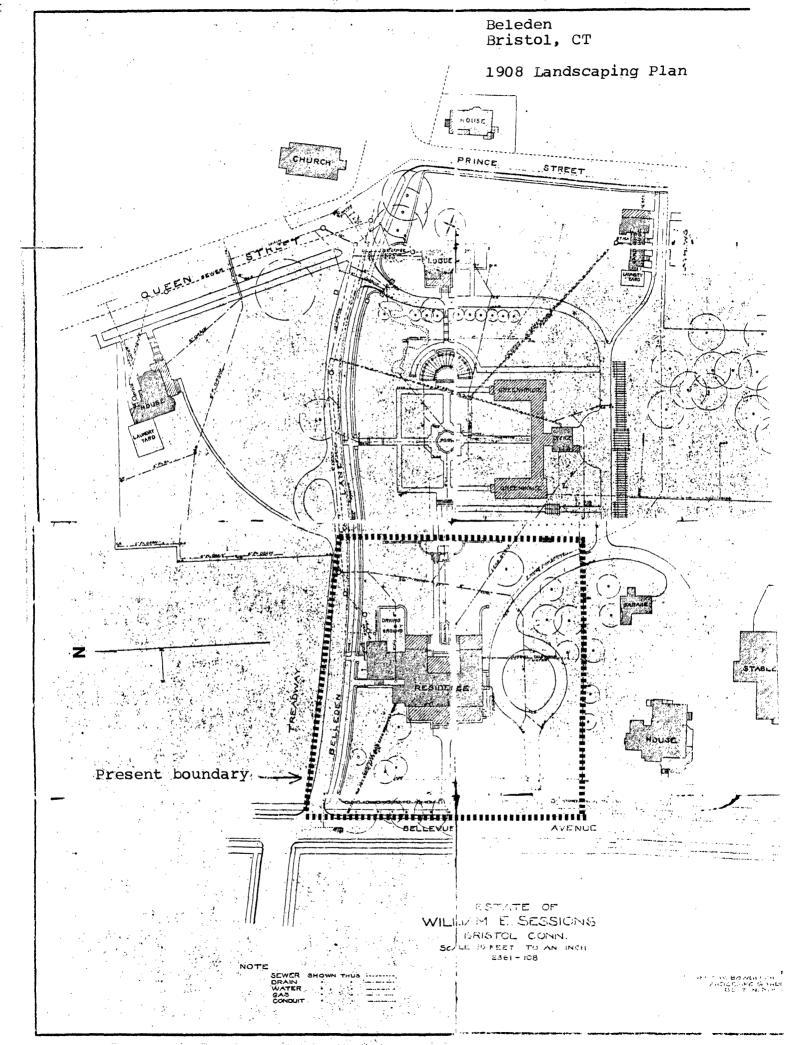


HOUSE FOR FRANKSFORD TRULL, WOBURN, MASS.
S. J. BROWN, Architect.



Ro. 1125. American Architect and Building Rews, July 17, 1597.





Plan, and photo map.



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