

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

BELL, ISSAAC, JR. HOUSE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: BELL, ISAAC, JR. HOUSE

Other Name/Site Number: EDNA VILLA

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 70 Perry Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Newport

Vicinity: N/A

State: Rhode Island

County: Newport

Code: 005

Zip Code: 02840

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

0 buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

0 Total

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

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  X  nomination   request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property   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

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Domestic

Sub: Single Dwelling

Current: Recreation & Culture

Sub: Museum

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late Victorian: Shingle Style

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation: Granite

Walls: Wood shingles, brick

Roof: Wood shingles

Other: Brick

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Isaac Bell House is set towards the back of a corner lot created by Perry Street and Bellevue Avenue. There is a spacious lawn in front of the east facade facing Bellevue Avenue. The original, curved entrance drive is on the southern border of the property, giving access to Perry Street. Although there have been changes to individual planting, the overall integrity of the original site design remains good. The Bell House was built between 1881 and 1883 by the architects McKim, Mead and White. It is a significant example of the Shingle Style, distinguished by the open character of its plan and the complex composition of its facades. The building is one of the earliest commissions of McKim, Mead and White, and it represents their most sophisticated approach to the development and refinement of the main features of the shingle style. As such, it is a landmark of late 19th century American architecture representing a turning point in the design of picturesque wooden houses. The exterior of the house has a red brick first floor and upper floors sheathed in shingles arranged in innovative wave and diamond patterns. The facades have features borrowed from the colonial era, such as sweeping gables and small-paned windows surmounted by stylized fan motifs. One of the most striking aspects of the Bellevue Avenue facade is the series of first-and second-floor porches with slender bamboo style supports, reflecting the architects' interest in combining Japanese inspired forms with the building's colonial elements. The brackets of the main entrance are made up of fanciful dolphins. The simple, substantial mass of the house, which Vincent Scully described as "the balloon frame sheathed and expressed as closed box," is punctuated on the south by a semi-circular, two-story tower. The east facade is defined by a pair of large third-story gables. The north facade has one great gable and the walls are sheathed in shingles forming a large diamond pattern. The west facade is the least visible, comprising simple brick and shingled walls with two dominant gables. The flat surfaces are delineated by delicate detailing, narrow wood cornices, thin wood frames at the door and window openings, and the subtle contrast between common brick and pressed brick. Each story of the house is also clearly marked by wooden cornices and string moldings that form a series of continuous lines unifying all of the facades. The foundation is of granite and supports the brick of the first story. The porch extends along the south and east elevations and is an exterior expression of the open, flowing plan of the first floor rooms. The bamboo inspired wood columns support a porch roof of shingles that creates a seamless appearance of wood shingles from the very rooftop of the house to the first floor.

There have been alterations to the house. These include a library addition (circa 1897-1898) to the southwest tower and a room and porch added to the west elevation in the 1920's. The Preservation Society of Newport County, which presently owns the house, commissioned the firm of Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, Baker, Architects to prepare an Historic Structures Report on the building. The report, completed in May of 1995, researched and documented the history of the building, including its alterations. The report noted that the house is in good physical condition, retaining its historic integrity with few exterior alterations to change the appearance of the house in the more than one hundred years of its history. Most of the wooden shingles on the facades had been replaced, the main roof and those of the porches had been recovered in composition shingles, the wooden shutters had been removed, and there had been minor repairs to the brickwork of the piazzas. In the east facade, there are three windows which lost their original fan-shaped decorations. The Historic Structures Report also noted the garage and stable indicated by insurance maps, which had ceased to exist on the site after 1897-1898. The exterior of the house is in the process of being restored by Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, Baker,

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Architects according to the documentation in the Historic Structures Report. The facades and roof have been reshingled with wood shingles, and the fan-shaped decorations of the third story windows in the east facade gable have been recreated. All of the original architectural features and decorative details are being conserved and will be returned to their original locations.

**First Floor**

The interior of the Bell House is recognized by scholars to be one of McKim, Mead and White's most successful domestic interiors. The architects considered the finish and presentation of the interior as an integral and important part of the Bell House. They drew on their knowledge of painting, sculpture and decorative arts, and thoroughly incorporated them into the Bell House in a unified composition. The decorative details were inspired by English Arts and Crafts and Queen Anne Revival sources, as well as American Colonial, Japanese, Moorish and French models. This was the early period in the careers of McKim, Mead and White, when they collaborated with artists and craftsmen, such as John LaFarge and Louis Comfort Tiffany. McKim, Mead and White's interiors at the Bell House are a fully developed American expression of the English Aesthetic movement, which combined both European and exotic motifs in an original manner.

The interior of the Bell House extends from a large, carefully proportioned and detailed central hall, which is the main feature of the interior. One enters the house through a vestibule into the hall at the center of the building. Both spaces are darkly lit in contrast to the brighter reception rooms. The focal point of the hall is an inglenook fireplace. To the right is the reception room and to the left is a study located just off of the fireplace inglenook. The fireplace has an extended hearth running from the study wall to the stairs. From the stair landing, two large, double-hung stained glass windows light the hall.

The first floor is distinguished by its open plan, achieved by the use of large sliding doors which open from the main reception rooms on to the central hall. Rooms may be closed off for privacy, or the main rooms of the first floor may be opened up creating a continuous, flowing space extending from the central hall through the dining, drawing and reception rooms onto the piazzas and the grounds. Architect and critic Arnold Lewis considered the Bell House to be "a bold artistic venture. The designers rejected the safe road--order, dignity, proven solutions--in favor of spatial excitement, contrasts (textures and void), variation (multiple shingle patterns), asymmetry of parameter and skyline, and mixed material (brick below and shingle above)."<sup>1</sup>

Each of the primary spaces (central hall, vestibule, reception, dining, and drawing rooms) has its own unique and distinct character achieved by the differences in scale, materials and lighting. Secondary spaces are generally more utilitarian in appearance and size, including areas and rooms that service the building: bathrooms, kitchen, storage areas, and staff areas. All of the rooms and functions revolve around the large central living hall.

**Vestibule**

The vestibule serves as an introduction to the much more expansive central hall beyond. The two spaces feature the same dark natural wood finishes.

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold Lewis. *American Country Houses of the Gilded Age*, Plate VII.

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**Living Hall (Central Hall)**

This hall serves as the introduction to an equally fine series of adjacent rooms. The combination of natural, earth-toned finishes, minimal lighting filtered through small window panes, the inglenook fireplace, and the ample but low expanse make the hall a warm, sheltering space.

The hall was described by architectural critic and historian, George Sheldon in 1886-1887<sup>2</sup>: “considerable pains have been taken with the decoration of the main hall, while at the same time the effort has been to preserve simplicity. The finish is in oak, with a base eighteen inches high. The mantle is of carved wood, and on either side of the fireplace is a small window of leaded glass, while in front of it stretches a hearth five feet wide, of red tile.” Above the vertical paneling, the plaster wall is covered with some of the original dark green and gold embossed wallpaper. The ceiling is also paneled in oak.

All of the woodwork, including the paneled ceiling, retains the original natural finish. In the center of the ceiling is a perforated brass brazier cover set within a square frame of oak beams and surrounded by brass tacks applied in a Moorish floral pattern. The narrow wall surface above the high wainscot retains the original floral-patterned wallpaper that imitates antique embossed leather. The green-ground paper features floral and leaf patterns covered in metallic gold. The heavy paper is secured to the wall with tacks that are in turn covered by a narrow, leather-like, heavy paper tape secured with stamped brass-headed nails.

The hall opens on to the primary rooms. The north wall opens on to the dining room. The east wall includes the unusually wide openings to the drawing room and the more conventional doorway to the reception room. The south wall opens to the entry vestibule and has a door to the library. The west side of the hall is dominated by the inglenook fireplace and the grand oak stairway. An adjoining doorway provides access to the service wing. The set of four drawing room doors are suspended from an overhead track and slide back in the manner of Japanese screen partitions. They hang by iron straps from bronze Japanese inspired wheels which roll along the overhead track. In the hall, the Bell family placed a very large, muted, red and blue oriental carpet which survives and is currently in storage at the Preservation Society of Newport County. Other extant Bell furnishings include a pair of upholstered armchairs with turned legs and an elaborately carved dolphin-legged table of the type dating to the 1860s-1870s. A bracket clock rests on a shelf affixed to the south wall.

**Fireplace/Alcove**

This alcove is one of the fine architectural compositions that make the Bell House so significant and it is unique among the features devised by the architects. The three recessed walls of the inglenook are fully paneled with dark oak woodwork. In this area there is an assemblage of various pieces of woodwork, some old at the time of installation, some contemporary. The antique portion of the woodwork consists of an elegant frame which forms the opening to the north wall. This was part of an antique Breton bedstead from France. An intricately carved screen that incorporates spindle wheels, panels, and inlaid wood opens to the stairway. There is a built-in bench to one side of the fireplace. The inglenook was a romantic

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<sup>2</sup>George Sheldon, as cited in Arnold Lewis, *American Country Houses of the Gilded Age*, (Sheldon's "Artistic Country Seats"), Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1982, p. xvi.

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interpretation of the low, sheltering hearths of Medieval English and European farmhouses and the Colonial houses of America.

The tile-faced opening of the broad fireplace is centered in the west wall. Inside the firebox, the back is lined with a cast iron panel embellished with fleur-de-lis and square earthenware tiles. A movable wooden bench in this area, with one arm and a pair of turned legs, sits against the south wall. A large wood-burning stove juts out from the inglenook fireplace and a red-vinyl bench surrounds the hearth. The floral patterns in the windows seen in the 1886 illustration were never executed.

**Drawing Room**

From the central hall, one enters the drawing room through a very wide opening with four multiple-paneled oak sliding doors. Following a traditional nineteenth-century precedent, this room and a smaller adjoining reception room are the most formal rooms in the house. The sliding doors on the west wall may open to expose most of the formal rooms to the informal central hall. The large windows on the drawing room's east wall open onto the piazza and grounds. The drawing room is a light filled contrast to the dark central hall.

The flexibility of such planning allowed for the central hall, drawing room and piazza to be opened up as one unit, or to be closed down and compartmentalized - a tradition taken from traditional Japanese domestic design much admired by McKim, Mead and White.

The decoration of the drawing room is dominated by a projecting chimney breast that includes a fireplace, mantle, and overmantel decorated with delicate classical ornament. The firebox is lined with small, square glazed white tiles, and the opening has a brass edging.

**Reception Room**

The Reception Room features a tulip motif on the walls, ceiling and fireplace. The fireplace, with its decorative tiles and finely carved overmantel enframing a mirror, is the primary feature of the room. The plan of the room includes a wide opening with pocket doors to the drawing room and a single door to the central hall.

The projecting chimney breast includes the decorative fireplace mantle and overmantel. The fire back is decorated with a flaming urn flanked by a teapot and chocolate pot. The opening is trimmed with a brass frame and hand-painted and glazed tiles. A narrow glass panel, set in a metal frame, is positioned at the top of the opening. The surround is flanked by flat wood pilasters and thin, baluster-like posts that extend upward to the top of the overmantel. Above a shallow projecting shelf is the large, rectangular beveled glass mirror, flanked by pairs of small, semi-circular shelves.

**Library**

The present form of the library is not an original part of the Bell House design. This room was enlarged in 1897 during the subsequent Barger family ownership. This alteration more than doubled the size of this room, and included a new central fireplace flanked by doorways toward the south. Because this room was used as a reading and study area, built-in bookcases at various intervals are located on the lower portion of the east and the west walls. Although the Barger family altered this room, it is possible that the 4-1/2 foot high built-in bookcases

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and wainscote survive from the Isaac Bell era. There are two curved windows in the south wall. The upper walls are plaster covered with embossed wallpaper. The fireplace with marble facing has a mantel shelf supported by Ionic columns and the overmantel mirror is framed with Corinthian columns.

**Dining Room**

The Dining Room is a finely crafted and designed space incorporating colonial American, English Aesthetic and Eastern motifs. The room has many of the same elements, such as a built-in sideboard and colonial inspired paneling, as the dining room of "Kingscote" in Newport, which McKim, Mead and White had just completed in 1881.

The doorway in the east wall opens to an expansive covered porch that was used by the owners when entertaining large numbers of guests, or simply for family living. The porch features four bamboo style columns of Japanese inspiration.

The fireplace is centered on the north wall and features a large firebox with an ornamental cast-iron fire back. The fireplace is faced with red marble and the hearth is composed of brick laid in a herringbone pattern. An overmantel contains large built-in cupboards. The slender parts surrounding the fireplace have net-like wooden screens and are topped by scrolled brackets decorated with a basket weave pattern which would have complemented the original rattan wall covering.

The mahogany built-in buffet in the west wall has doors with filigreed brass hardware in the Moorish style. It is described in great detail in George Sheldon's commentary on this room.<sup>3</sup> Several original armchairs that are stored in the attic may have been used in the Dining Room because these chairs are similar, if not identical, to the dining chairs at Kingscote. The walls were originally covered with a woven rattan. Small sections of the rattan survive in the room. There are also nine pierced brass roundels (originally there were eleven) surviving in the room. They were mounted on the woven rattan and framed by strips of wood.

**Kitchen**

The Kitchen of the Isaac Bell House is similar to those in other Shingle-Style houses of the era. It is the largest and most important room in the service portion of the house, and is located at the greatest distance from the living areas. A sheet-iron wood range hood and a built-in wood cabinet on the south wall are the surviving original kitchen fittings.

**Second floor**

The Second Floor of the Isaac Bell House contains four large bedrooms, two baths, sitting room/bedroom, a dressing room, one laundry room and a large stair hall.

The family bedrooms on the second floor are arranged around a large central hall. The primary features in the hall are the two stairways: the main stair ascending from the first floor and the much smaller stairway leading to the third floor. The principal bedrooms and an adjoining sitting room are arranged to form a connecting suite along the east side of the hall.

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<sup>3</sup>See, George Sheldon, as cited in Arnold Lewis, *American Country Houses of the Gilded Age* (Sheldon's "Artistic Country Seats"), Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1982, p. xvi.

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Service areas along the north wall originally included only large storage rooms, but during the Barger era two large bedrooms were created (Rooms 209 and 208). The former was an entirely new construction, while the latter was created from a larger room (208). The primary features in these simple spaces are the service stairway, the original gas wall brackets and a simple gas lantern of the main hall.

**Room 201/Stair Hall**

The Stair Hall is lighted by the monumental pair of leaded clear and pale grey-green colored glass windows. The stair has oak balustrades, handrails supported by square-turn balusters, posts ornamented with incised fluting above the balustrade, and octagonal newel posts at each end of the balustrade. The walls of the stairwell are covered with vertical oak paneling.

**Room 202/Bedchamber/Sitting Room**

Because this room is conveniently positioned between Room 207, Mr. Bell's bedroom, and Room 203, Mrs. Bell's bedroom, this may have served as a joint sitting room or spare bedroom. The room has finely rendered details, including a fireplace mantel with a Chinese lattice pattern, and doorways with corner blocks carved with sunbursts. A window/door leads out to the northeast porch.

**Room 203/Bedroom (Mrs. Bell's Bedroom)**

This bedroom has an elaborate decorative program. The south wall is the most intricately designed scheme composed of a bay window, a fireplace and built in cabinets and niches. The bay windows are separated by slender colonettes. The fireplace opening is also flanked by colonettes which support overmantel shelves with spindlework. Next to the fireplace are built in cabinets with three arched niches, two serving as cabinets with glass doors. The central open niche is decorated with a stylized shell motif. A 2 ½ foot plaster frieze encircles the room. The frieze simulates a woven basket weave pattern, which is contemporary with a similar plaster wall treatment at McKim, Mead and White's Newport Casino Theater.

The small adjoining room (Room 204) with its built-in wardrobes was used as a dressing room. The center doorway in the north wall opens to a closet with built-in chest, and a short passage leading to Room 202.

**Room 204/Dressing Room**

This Dressing Room served Bedroom 203. The room contains two wardrobes installed by the Barger family and an incandescent single-arm wall fixture of the 1930s or 40s.

**Room 205/Bedchamber**

The most significant architectural feature in this guest bedroom is the broad, curved wall that forms the south end of the room. This room and Room 207 are the only bedrooms that have adjoining bathrooms. The fireplace comprises a complete unit incorporating built-in cabinets and shelves.

**Room 206/Bathroom**

The tile surfaces and the fixtures of this principal bathroom date to the Barger era (after 1891). The bathroom has six-inch square white Minton tiles, marble slabs located beneath the lavatory, toilet and bathtub, and a china basin set in a marble slab supported by nickel plated bronze legs.

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**Room 207/Mr. Bell's Bedroom**

Although this is the largest of the second-floor bedrooms, and has an adjoining bathroom and private porch, the decor is plain. These rooms may have originally been used *en suite* with Room 202, which may have been a sitting room shared with Mrs. Bell's room (Room 203).

**Room 208**

This large room has carefully treated window and door trim. Some time after 1899, the room was divided for the Barger family. A new, smaller front room served the family, but the rear room was probably a servant's bedroom. The partitioning of this room was removed some time after 1969.

**Room 209**

This room, dating to the 1920s or 1930s, is an addition to the rear west side of the service wing on the second floor. At the first floor level the extension consisted of an open porch. The addition replaces part of the narrow balcony of which only the north end survives.

**Room 210**

The Bargers had this small room created from the original Room 208 that was then entered from a new doorway in the south wall.

**Room 211**

This room was a storage space with the added amenities of built-in cabinets and a small window.

**Room 213**

This small service room functions as a laundry room, but the original use remains unknown. The pipe chase encapsulates one of the best preserved and large samples of original Bell era wallpaper.

**Third Floor/Stair Hall**

The Third Floor of the Isaac Bell House contains two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a nursery, a stair hall, servant's hall, two servant's bedrooms, and several storage areas. The primary space of the third floor is the large Nursery (Room 302) which has a fireplace. The remaining spaces were used by the staff and for storage.

There is a fine leaded-glass skylight situated in the central hall.

The large bedrooms which are open immediately off the centrally positioned hall, (Rooms 302, 305, and possibly 307) were used by the family and guests. The servants were beyond the door in the north wall and used the rear stair to reach this floor. A massive, free-standing pine cabinet dominates the north wall. This cabinet, similar to the cabinets in Room 204, has sliding doors, bronze pulls, and opens to a finely finished interior. This area also has Barger era built-in shelving on the west wall.

**Room 302/Nursery (Children's Room)**

As the largest and most finished third-floor room, the nursery served the three young Bell children (Isaac, Norah and Henrietta).

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**Room 303/Bedroom for Nurse or Nanny**

This small, well-lit room was used by the Bell children's nurse or nanny.

**Room 304/Storeroom**

As well as serving as a storeroom, this space provides access to the attic stairway.

**Room 305**

The exact purpose of this room is unknown. Because the room was originally heated, it is likely that this was either a family bedroom, guest room, or children's playroom.

**Room 307**

The presence of service call buttons indicates that this room may have been a room used by the Bell or Barger families, or it is possible that this was a servant's room.

**Room 308**

This staff bedroom located in the service passage has two electric call bells immediately outside the room and above the hall door.

**Fourth Floor/Rooms 401 and 401A/Attic**

The attic was used primarily for storage. Rooms 401A and 402 were separate storage rooms that could be secured. The significant features of the large central space (401) include the skylight panel and surrounding balustrade as well as the large cistern tank.

From Isaac Bell to the Bargers, the house sustained a few changes. In 1952, Mrs. Barger sold the house to Leonard J. DeSantis, who lived in the house for only one year and then rented it until it was sold in 1956 to Louise C. Kimball and Ruth W. Leland. Louise Kimball and Ruth Leland operated a nursing home in the house. In 1971, Louise Kimball's son, Clive, sold the property to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Going. In 1994, the Goings sold the house to the Preservation Society of Newport County. Although the house had several owners from the 1950s to the present, the building has retained its structural integrity with few changes.

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**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:

4

NHL Theme(s):

III. Expressing Cultural Values  
5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design

Areas of Significance:

Architecture; Social History

Period(s) of Significance:

1883-1886

Significant Dates:

1881-1883

Significant Person(s):

N/A

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

McKim, Mead, and White, Architects

NHL Comparative Categories:

XVI. Architecture  
L. Shingle Style (1880-1900)

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

Isaac Bell's selection of McKim, Mead and White as the architects for his Newport villa was an important turning point for the success of the firm and the artistic development of the architects. After the completion of the Newport Casino in 1881, the Bell House was one of their first commissions for domestic design in what would become a prolific period of the newly founded firm's practice. From 1881 through the mid-1880s, through a series of commissions, the architects would formulate and define the primary features, both in planning, massing and ornamentation. According to architectural historian Vincent Scully, the Bell House stands out as a masterpiece of the architects' Shingle Style, a style in which the firm played a pivotal role as represented in their Newport houses. From Newport, the Shingle Style spread across the nation throughout the remainder of the late 19th and into the early 20th centuries.

The Isaac Bell House is a sophisticated example of the Shingle Style by McKim, Mead and White, one of the most creative and prolific American architectural firms. During the course of the 19th century, Newport was a veritable laboratory for architectural experimentation by the country's leading designers. The commission to design a villa at Newport made a national reputation for many young architects, and reconfirmed the reputation of older architects who were well established in their careers. The Bell House is a critical chapter in Newport's nationally significant role in patronage, artistic inspiration and architectural excellence.

Isaac Bell was a successful cotton broker and one of the primary investors in the transatlantic cable. He was a member of an old New York family, and retired with a fortune he had accumulated and inherited in 1877 at the age of 31. In 1878, he married Jeanette Bennett at the Newport estate of her brother, James Gordon Bennett, the owner of the *New York Herald* newspaper. In the summer of 1879, James Gordon Bennett commissioned the construction of the Newport Casino by the firm of McKim, Mead and White. Upon its completion in 1879, the Casino was an immediate success. It became the center of the summer resort's social life, and reinforced the architects' social and professional reputation. It was only natural that the Bells turned to this popular firm to prepare plans for their Newport house.

Isaac Bell, Jr. also became active in politics in Rhode Island, serving in 1884 as president of the Cleveland and Hendricks club, a group of prominent Republicans who led an independent movement to defeat James G. Blaine as the Republican presidential candidate. Within a month of taking office, President Cleveland appointed Bell as Minister Resident to the Court of the Netherlands. As a result, the Bell's Newport house was rented during 1886 and 1887 to Samuel F. Barger and his family. After a long illness, Mr. Bell died on January 20, 1889 at the age of forty-two. The *Newport Daily News* remarked that with Isaac Bell's death the city had lost "one of the best as well as most conspicuous of her adopted citizens," who "from the first had identified himself with the local interests of the town."

In 1891, Samuel Barger, a New York attorney, and his family continued to rent the house. On September 9, 1891, Bell's wife, Jeannette, then in Paris, executed two deeds to the property to

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Samuel Barger. The Bell family had owned the property for almost exactly a decade and sold it to the Bargers.

Upon conveyance of the property in 1891, Samuel F. Barger named it "Edna Villa" in honor of his wife Edna Jeanie LaFavor. At the time of Barger's death in 1914, he was identified not as a lawyer but as a capitalist, who "for a number of years...had not been active in the law profession."<sup>1</sup> He served on the executive and law committees of New York Central Railroad.

The highly respected and enormously busy architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, based in New York, began in 1874 when Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909) and William Rutherford Mead (1846-1920) began to collaborate in their work. In 1879 they were joined by Stanford White (1853-1906).

McKim studied at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts between 1867 and 1870. He was the only original partner to have an academic architectural background. It was he who established its goals, and he who was seen as the most influential in the history of the firm. Mead's name was second on the masthead. He was in charge of the office and the practical manager of the firm.

Stanford White was one of the greatest decorative talents America has produced. He was not only a fine architect, but a designer of lavish interiors, picture frames, magazine covers, jewelry and other decorative objects.

Charles Follen McKim and Stanford White were apprentices to Henry Hobson Richardson from 1874-1875 on the design for a house for Mr. and Mrs. William Watts Sherman on Shepard Avenue in Newport. Mrs. Sherman, nee Annie Derby Wetmore, had grown up at the adjacent estate, Chateau-sur-Mer (1851-1852). Connections with leading families such as the Shermans and Wetmores were a strong recommendation for the architects' future success. The Watts Sherman House was inspired by the half timbered walls, great gables, and innovative space planning of houses in the "Olde English" or "Queen Anne Revival" style of the 1860s and 1870s by British architects such as Phillip Webb and Richard Norman Shaw. These architects were inspired by England's vernacular past, as seen in the small manors, taverns and farmhouses of the countryside. American architects, particularly McKim, Mead and White and their contemporaries, notably Robert Swain Peabody and John Goddard Sterns, who built several Newport villas including the "Breakers" of 1877 for Pierre Lorillard, wanted to follow the English example and create an American architecture based on the country's colonial past.

While being introduced to the most recent trends in domestic design by Richardson, the young McKim and White were also engaged in sketching and photographing 18th century buildings in Newport and other New England coastal towns. McKim was particularly intrigued by colonial architecture since he and his wife summered in the Point section of Newport, where he had remodeled the old Robinson and Dennis houses on Washington Street between 1872-1876. Visits to Whitehall, the colonial farmhouse of the 18th century philosopher George Berkeley in Middletown, were quite popular, and McKim included a photograph of the rear facade with its prominent gable and shingled walls in the *New York Sketchbook of Architecture*

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<sup>1</sup>*National Encyclopedia*, 2, p. 497.

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(1874). Stanford White was also familiar with Whitehall and nearby Paradise Valley, a mecca for painters and writers. White initially wanted to become a painter and studied with John LaFarge, who spent several summers in Paradise Valley and found the area a great source of inspiration.

The summers from 1874-1879 were crucial in the architects' artistic development. The theories and practices of the English Arts and Crafts architects, a burgeoning interest in Newport's colonial architecture, and the vibrant circle of painters and writers who gathered at Newport would all inspire and influence the evolution of the Shingle Style and its manifestation in the Isaac Bell House.

McKim, Mead and White provided plans for the Isaac Bell House in the summer of 1881 and construction began under the supervision of the general contractor P.E. Read of Hartford, Connecticut. The grounds were laid out by Thomas Galvin, who had recently worked on the landscape of the Casino. The building was completed in the summer of 1883 when the Bells took up residence.

The great gables, expansive piazzas, the tower and the shingled facades of the Bell House were harmoniously composed and received much favorable criticism in the press. The first story of brick, the elaborate composition of small panned windows within the gables and the stylized decoration of the facades owed much to the Watts Sherman House and the English Queen Anne Revival. However, the Bell House also broke with these sources to achieve a uniquely American appearance. George Sheldon, the author of *Artistic Country Seats* (1886) described the house accordingly:

This villa, built about four years ago, by Messrs. McKim, Mead and White, is of a modernized colonial style, the principal feature on the east front being the double gables...The second story is of shingles and the first story of brick...All the courses of the roof have cut shingles, and there is a wrought iron finial on the roof.

The description of the house as "modernized colonial" displays the architects' interest in using materials and ornament found in American buildings. The use of wood shingles was uniquely American, and shingled farmhouses, barns, and windmills were found in abundance in Rhode Island. The wood shingles were traditional surface materials, but they were used in unusual wave and diamond patterns. The use of these historical elements in innovative ways was the basis of the American designer's search for something new that would proclaim its separateness from Europe and be something truly American, combining the best of the past with that of the present.

The Bell House is a unique combination of antiquarian interest in colonial American architecture with the most avant garde English approaches to house design. The touches of Japanese and Moorish inspired details also reflect the current fashion for the exotic extolled by the English Aesthetic Movement. Vincent Scully, architectural historian and retired Yale professor, traced the development of the style from its evolution following the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, where there was a much-admired and discussed Japanese house with mats, movable screens, and other spaces, articulated by its structural frame. With adaptations of certain Japanese elements, the most advanced of the American architects, such as McKim, Mead and White, disciplined and interwove their interior spaces and their porches.

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Their direct Japanese influences, as found in the Isaac Bell House, were from contemporary Japanese “villas”. Domestic design had never before produced such an open, flexible and varied set of living spaces. That inventiveness was expressed through an equal flexibility of approach to section and massing in the Bell House.

The Bell House is part of an historic continuum in American domestic design, beginning with the Gothic Revival cottages of the 1840s and culminating in the houses of Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 1900s. McKim, Mead and White used the standard features of early 19th century architecture, such as towers, sweeping rooflines, enclosing porches, and asymmetrical plans and elevations, in a new and dynamic manner. The Bell House is a unified design that does not slavishly imitate any one historic precedent, but brings together many decorative details and architectural motifs into one harmonious whole. This is the pivotal role it served in inspiring the work of the next generation of architects, and its legacy is seen in the open planning and masterfully designed “Prairie Houses” of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Bell House is one of Newport’s architectural monuments. Newport’s role as a treasury of American architecture was aptly stated by Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer in “*American Country Dwellings*” (*The Century Magazine*, May 1886).

But to the student of domestic architecture, Newport is the most interesting of our summer colonies. Its history is the longest...Colonial houses are abundant...Its newer portions show a characteristic instance of that way of village planning which I have already spoken of as peculiarly American -wide streets of detached houses, each with its own small lawn and garden, and all over-shadowed by thickset and lofty trees. Here the architecture includes every post-colonial type: the plain, square piazzad box; the “vernacular” villa with “French roof” and jig-saw fringing and abnormal hues of paint; the pseudo “Queen Anne” cottage; and that still later product which is again thoroughly American, but in a new and better way.

The “later product” was the Modernized Colonial or “Shingle Style” as it has come to be known. Scholars have noted the importance of the Bell House as the crowning achievement of the Shingle Style. Henry-Russell Hitchcock included the Bell House in *Rhode Island Architecture*, first published in 1939, citing particularly “the bamboo-like posts of the two-tiered circular porch” as deserving particular mention for their grace and ingenuity.”<sup>2</sup> Scully called the Bell House a masterpiece of the Shingle Style and hailed it as an example of the “specific individuality” of McKim, Mead and White’s work during the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> The house was recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey in 1969 and 1971. The Shingle Style has, in fact, been fondly referred to as “the first modern American style” ever since Vincent J. Scully, Jr. gave it the name in his book, *The Shingle Style*, published in 1952.

The years between 1881 and 1885 comprised a short but revolutionary period when McKim, Mead and White developed and refined the Shingle Style. Newport played a seminal role in the evolution of the architects’ work. Their commissions for the Newport Casino (1879-1881),

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<sup>2</sup>Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Rhode Island Architecture* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1939), p.57.

<sup>3</sup>Vincent J. Scully, Jr. *The Shingle Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 140.

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and houses for Samuel Tilton (1881-1882), Isaac Bell, Jr. (1881-1883), Robert Goelet (1882-1883), and Samuel Coleman (1882-1883) represent the architects' experimentation with open space planning, the intricate massing of facades into unified compositions of gables and piazzas, and the establishment of a vocabulary of ornament, both exterior and interior, that was a modern synthesis of historic models from colonial America, England, Europe and the East. The Bell House stands out among McKim, Mead and White's domestic designs as the most sophisticated and clearly articulated example of the Shingle Style.

The Bell House represents the search for an American identity in architecture, based on combining the past and present with great freedom and experimentation. It is truly an American Landmark.

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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: # RI-308
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):
  - Archives, Preservation Society of Newport County, Newport, RI.
  - Archives, Newport Historical Society, Newport, RI.
  - Newport City Hall, Records of Deeds, Newport, RI.

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: .98 acres

UTM References: Zone	Easting	Northing
A	19 307150	4594350

Verbal Boundary Description:

All that certain lot or parcel of land, with buildings and improvements thereon, situated in the city and county of Newport, state of Rhode Island (Plat No. 33, Lot No. 25).

Boundary Justification:

The boundary of the property is the same as recorded in the deed of August 25, 1994, Land Evidence Book No. 653, Page 450, held by the City Clerk's Office of Newport County, RI. The property includes the house and gardens that have historically been part of the Isaac Bell, Jr. property.

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