Historic and Architectural Survey

Guthrie Place
New London, Connecticut

Wick York
Sandra Kersten Chalk
Erin Marchitto

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New London Landmarks
49 Washington Street
New London, CT 06320

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Introduction

New London Landmarks took on this project to survey Guthrie Place in the hopes of calling attention to the historic Lighthouse Inn. The Inn is for sale, but, because of legal difficulties with the previous owners, it is languishing on the market.

The Lighthouse Inn was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. The nomination includes the 2.8 acres and beach rights that remain in common ownership with the residence (the Inn) and outbuildings. Exterior changes made in 1985, which included an elevator required for code compliance, were considered “sensitive.”

A severe fire in the upper floors of the building in 1979 had required extensive, multi-year, $2.5 million renovation project. In a 2003 story about the Inn, then owner Jim McGrath claimed: “This Inn qualifies as exceptional. Over one hundred years after its construction and after an unprecedented renovation, the Lighthouse Inn has managed to successfully combine the elegance of its rich history with the necessities of modern business and entertainment!”

Through the years, local residents depended upon the Lighthouse Inn for all important social engagements. It was a popular location for dinner parties, their famous and elegant Sunday Brunch, and a site for weddings and other social occasions.
Methodology

New London Landmarks archives were the primary research source providing history of the Lighthouse Inn. New London City directories covering the year from 1929—1946 helped to confirm construction dates for Guthrie Place.

Key texts mentioned in the inventory forms include:

- A Field Guild to American Houses, Virginia and Lee McAlester. Alfred A. Knoph, 2005
- The American Colonial Revival in the 1930s. David Gebhard. Winterthur Portfolio, 22, No. 2/3, 1987

City of New London, CT, Tax Assessor’s Office
Vision Appraisals

Interview with Leah Spitz, owner of 40 Guthrie Place 1949—1981.
Guthrie Place, New London, CT
Historic and Architectural Overview

Guthrie Place, New London, Connecticut

The Lighthouse Inn at the top of Guthrie Place was originally the summer home for the Charles Strong Guthrie family of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The grand building sits back, aloof from the water and busy Pequot Avenue, with sweeping views of the Thames River and Long Island and Fishers Island sounds. It was built as the major residence for their 12-acre estate in 1901. Designed by the noted Boston Architect William Ralph Emerson, today it is one of the oldest and largest buildings remaining from the Pequot Colony era (1853 – 1908). The Guthrie family was attracted by the nearby Pequot House, the cornerstone of a popular summer resort colony that included members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished Northeastern families, two 19th century presidents, and a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Some guests found the area so agreeable that they bought land and built their own summer places with the area becoming a small version of Newport, Rhode Island.
Guthrie Place was a pathway leading from Pequot Avenue to the Guthrie Mansion. On either side of the pathway a 6-acre garden separated the mansion from the water. As described in a story about the mansion, it was filled with wildflowers of all kinds, from wild roses in the spring to asters and goldenrod in the autumn. It was noted for "a riot of lovely color, a superb garden of Nature's own planting," with a beautiful, natural lily-pond at its center at the shore-front. Frederick Law Olmsted planned the landscaping for Charles Guthrie and research notes indicate that the original plantings were all planned and planted by the Olmsted firm. A private beach for the estate was just across Pequot Avenue. The whole 12-acre estate overlooked the mouth of the Thames River and Long Island Sound.

"The Pequot Colony was known as the summer residence of people of wealth and fashion. The neighborhood held numerous homes of taste and culture, and several that were really sumptuous, and in size and furnishing, veritable palaces." ... Picturesque New London, 1901

In 1853 the Pequot House began to attract wealthy New York families to spend the summer enjoying fresh ocean breezes in beautiful surroundings along the Thames River. Twenty-two cottages were built by the hotel and with the expanding popularity of this resort many families built their own “cottages” for long summer visits.

New London saw a great deal of residential construction in this area in the early 1900s. When the Pequot Inn burned and closed in 1908 a period of change began as the neighborhood’s grand “summer cottages” became year-round residences and new neighborhoods were created along Ocean and Montauk avenues. While many large homes were built, many more moderate homes lined the side streets off the main avenues. The area thrived and did a great deal to increase the city’s population in the early part of the 20th century.

As part of the changing social and economic community, in 1928 Meadow Court became the Lighthouse Inn and much of the surrounding estate was sold off for building lots on streets behind the Inn. Guthrie Place was part of that expansion in the 1930s. The beautiful gardens were demolished and Guthrie Place was laid out between the Inn and Pequot Avenue.
Houses on Guthrie Place were built between 1929 and 1937 reflecting a new "Modern" movement in domestic architecture that began in the late 19th century. New construction techniques and facade materials led to a simplified look with a lack of applied ornamentation. The absence of non-functional decoration is visible on all the homes. This reflects several cultural influences on architectural styles in the 1930s - the Great Depression, print media, and American's interest in their nation's history.

There were a number of new architectural styles popular in the early 1900s. The Bungalow Style (1890-1940) was in style in New London and can be found throughout the city, especially in the Crystal Avenue neighborhood. Number 28 Guthrie Place is very much in this style with gently pitched and broad gables, and an open porch, closed off with windows. There are many variations in the Bungalow style, but the comfortable and functional lines are easily identified.

Set back from the street and located mostly in the center of their lots, Guthrie Place homes reflect a typical neighborhood pattern of individually styled houses in urban neighborhoods. Economical in design and smaller in scale than those in nearby Pequot Colony area, they are typical of the 1930s. Numbers 19, 24, 25, and 30 most nearly match the “Modern” movement mentioned above. Number 35 is unique to the street with its dominant front stone chimney, sharply pitched roof line and combination of stone, brick and shingle siding. Number 37 almost looks like the top ½ of number 35 with its steeply pitched roof and two front windows with the center door. It does not fit into any easily identified category.

Forty Guthrie Place is difficult to describe. It might be identified as a variation of the Prairie Style (1900 – 1920) or the International Style (1920 – 1945) but was called a “Swiss Chalet” by the original owner who built the house as a “honeymoon cottage” for his daughter and her new husband in 1927, and had very specific ideas for the home. New owners in 1947 began a 30-year project to modernize the house. A cathedral ceiling is on the first floor, the second, three-quarter floor has bedrooms. Little can be seen from the street; a two-car garage and the enclosed entryway provide total privacy to the interior living quarters. The house is quite large, 3113 square feet of living space, with a large deck and patio overlooking the lawn.
Bibliography

A Field Guild to American Houses, Virginia and Lee McAlester. Alfred A. Knoph, 2005

The American Colonial Revival in the 1930s. David Gebhard. Winterthur Portfolio, 22, No. 2/3, 1987


Resources Related to Minority and Women’s History

There are no Women’s or Minority issues related to this survey.
Recommendations for National Register of Historic Places designation

Although none of the surveyed houses offer a distinctive architectural character, the street as a whole represents its 1930s era when money was tight and building forms were simpler.

A consideration for a larger National Register listing would be to expand research to the neighborhood around the Lighthouse Inn and encompass all of the land, the 12 acres, that were part of the original Guthrie estate. This could bring in a more varied architectural look at homes built in the mid 20th century.
William Ralph Emerson was an important figure in the development of late 19th century American domestic architecture.

Historians have considered Emerson one of the inventors of the Shingle style, a short lived but uniquely American domestic idiom. He designed the first completely shingled house of the 1870s, the C.J. Morrill House in Bar Harbor, 1879. He became one of the most popular domestic architects in the Northeast. His work was increasingly marked by open plans and imaginative treatment of interior space, by a feeling for materials and a playful and unpedantic use of both Queen Anne and Colonial Revival details. He was exceptionally sensitive to natural surroundings, siting his buildings carefully and placing windows to frame important views.

Meadow Court, designed in the Mission Style with strong overtones of Mediterranean style, forms a half circle so every room of the house had a view of the gardens or the Sound. In its heyday in the 1930s it became a focal point for social events and a retreat for film stars including Bette Davis and Joan Crawford according to an Historic Hotels of America brochure promoting the Inn.

The National Register Listing application adds this: “Emerson’s design for the Lighthouse Inn (1902), much different from his earlier work, is significant in several respects. As one of the few documented commissions from late in the architect’s long career (1857—1909), it illuminates his entire work and artistic development. . . . this commission is distinctive in its Mission style. It is the only known example reflecting a strong interest in Spanish colonial architecture. Following travels in the Hispanic world, Emerson published an illustrated volume extolling the ‘beauty, completeness and richness’ of the architecture, ‘an almost unexpected revelation.’ Elements of the Lighthouse Inn design suggest the direct influence of the publication on this work.”
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