

Architectural & Historical Report for 37 Ocean Avenue Siasconset, Massachusetts

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THE 'SCONSET TRUST, INC.

Preservation Easements

The 'Sconset Trust preserves the unique character of the east end of Nantucket Island in Massachusetts through conservation of areas of open land and preservation of structures of historical and architectural significance in 'Sconset. The Trust works with the entire island community and collaborates with conservation and historic preservation groups to achieve its goals.

This report was prepared to highlight the important architectural and historic features of this house. The Trust hopes that emphasizing such features will encourage current and future owners of historically significant houses to preserve important interior and exterior building features for future generations. The Trust stands ready to assist homeowners in assessing the appropriateness of tools like preservation restrictions and rights of first refusal, which may include tax benefits.

For more information on how the Trust can help, please contact the Executive Director, Elizabeth G. Grubbs.

The 'Sconset Trust is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Please visit the web site at sconsettrust.org.

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1. SUMMARY AND PROJECT SCOPE

Built as a summer house for two families in 1883, the property at 37 Ocean Avenue in Siasconset is a contributing resource within the Nantucket Historic District, a National Historic Landmark District, which is listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places as well as a local historic district.

The intent of this study is to present the history of the dwelling at 37 Ocean Avenue and establish its architectural and cultural significance. This study includes a survey and study of the architecture, form and materials of the existing structure, a survey of historical maps and photographs of the property, an examination of the records on file at the town of Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Probate Court and Planning and Land Use Services (PLUS) records, as well as published and archival sources.

This report was prepared for The 'Sconset Trust, Inc. by Marsha L. Fader, AIA Architect and Betsy Tyler, Historian.

2. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

37 Ocean Avenue, also known as "Thalassa", when constructed in 1883 was an excellent and rare example of 19th-century Stick Style architecture on Nantucket. The representative and most distinctive architectural elements for this style are decorative bands of wood trim or 'stickwork' applied horizontally, vertically or diagonally to the exterior wall surfaces. An abundance of this 'stickwork' was used at the gable ends at Thalassa.

What has survived in this dwelling derives its current significance from changes made in 1936 when the east ocean-front portion was transformed into a performance space for a concert pianist. The north gable end fenestration for the cathedral ceiling as well as unusual 1883 first floor fenestration and buttress-like walls combine to make this dwelling a unique and rare, historic structure.

There is also a unique cultural significance to the original architectural plans designed by Green & Wicks Architects of Auburn, New York. The dwelling was designed as a summer house for the families of two sisters with a clear delineation for the separation of spaces. The dwelling was essentially designed as two 'cottages' under one roof surrounded by open porch 'verandas'. There were separate 'Sitting Rooms' and a total of fifteen (15) 'Bed Rooms' or 'Chambers' as they are noted on the plans. The families, however, did share one 'Dining Room' and one 'Kitchen' and two "Water Closets' (toilets). The design was somewhat akin to the concept of current-day co-housing. There was no bathroom sink, tub or shower. The original design for this summer house for two families represented a unique program of construction and use.

3. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Alice G. Burbank, Katherine Burbank, Julia Burbank and Annie F. Richards, Thalassa, 1883 Remodeled by Robert O'Connor, The Studio, 1936

37 Ocean Avenue is in the Sunset Heights section of Siasconset, on the bluff south of Main Street. Charles H. Robinson and Franklin A. Ellis developed Sunset Heights in the 1870s, building the Ocean View House and selling house lots in the area south of the hotel bordered by Ocean, Grand, and Atlantic Avenues. Houses built in Sunset Heights were large two-story Victorian cottages similar in style and size to the first houses built on the north bluff of Siasconset and contrasting with the small 18th- and 19th-century cottages in the center of the village and the Underhill cottages that were modeled after them in the 1870s and 1880s on Evelyn, Lily, and Pochick Streets.

At the site of 37 Ocean Avenue, on Lot 1 Carew, Lot 2 Linden and Lots 11, 12, and 13 Ocean Avenue stood a two-story double house known as Thalassa, designed by Edward B. Green, Sr. (1854-1950) and William Sydney Wicks of Green & Wicks, Architects, of Auburn, New York for Alice G. Burbank (along with her sister-in-law Katherine Burbank and Julia Burbank) and her sister, Annie F. Richards. The Burbanks and Richards each owned one half of the property: Burbanks the north half and Richards the south. Both Burbanks and

Richards secured mortgages from Charles H. Robinson in the late summer 1883 and those documents note the "newly built" house on the property. (Book 68, pp. 430-32; 433-35)

What is known about the original house is derived from architectural plans that show the large house divided into two separate cottages on the first floor by a central veranda that connected with the verandas around sides of the exterior. The north section of the house (Burbanks) was smaller, with a sitting room and one bedroom on the first floor, while the south section (Richards) had a larger sitting room and two bedrooms on the first floor. Each half of the house featured multiple bedrooms on the second floor. A shared dining room and kitchen were in the rear of the house. A copy of the original architectural plan is in the possession of the current owner. The design is unique; no other building on the island was similarly constructed.

The outline of the large house is depicted on Harry Platt's *Map of the Village of Siasconset, 1888*, and on Sanborn maps of the period. In 1901, the four-story Beach House hotel was built just north of 37 Ocean and dominated the avenue for more than fifty years, until it was demolished in 1957.

Alice Burbank died in 1930, predeceased by her husband General James B. Burbank in 1928 and his unmarried sisters Katherine (d.1908) and Julia (d.1918). Annie F. Richards died in 1903. The two halves of the house were inherited by daughters. Alice Burbank's daughter Alice Tweedy sold her interest in the house to her sister Marion Knowles in 1935, making Knowles the sole owner of the north half of the property. Annie Richards's daughter Caroline Newcomb inherited the south portion of the property. First cousins Knowles and Newcomb sold the house to Robert O'Connor in 1936.

An acclaimed concert pianist, Robert O'Connor of New York City performed in venues across the United States and in Europe. He spent summers at the cottage known as the Sheiling at 41 Ocean Avenue with his friend and wealthy patron Gertrude Leverett. O'Connor acquired the cottage Thalassa adjacent to the Sheiling in order to convert it to a music studio. He removed the second floor and opened the entire first floor to the rafters, creating one large room. According to Mary Wheeler Heller in an interview with Nancy Anne Newhouse in *Voices of the Village: An Oral History of 'Sconset:* "Two sisters lived in this house. . . This was originally a double house. The sisters shared the back where both families ate and cooked together. There was a big veranda around front . . . Robert O'Connor completely remodeled this house into what you see here, although we have added on. In this part of the living room the paneling on the wall is the sheathing from the old house."

A notice of a recital at the "O'Connor Studio" appeared in the *Inquirer and Mirror* July 31, 1937, indicating that the work of converting Thalassa to a music studio took place between July 1936 and July 1937. O'Connor held numerous concerts at the studio in the period 1937–1949. He sold the studio in 1951 to Gladys Lawrence Wheeler of Sterling, Illinois, and gave up his 'Sconset summers in favor of Tuscon, Arizona, where he taught at the University of Arizona.

Gladys Wheeler, wife of Leroy C. Wheeler, died in 1956. Leroy Wheeler deeded the house to their daughter, Mary W. Heller, in 1958. She removed and redesigned the original dining room and kitchen area in the rear of the house on the footprint of the 1883 structure, as approved by the Nantucket Board of Appeals in 1997. Heller established the Mary W. Heller 2009 Family Trust Agreement and secured a Massachusetts Land Court certificate for the property in that name in 2009. She died in 2017. Continuing the long tradition of female ownership of the property, her daughter Kate Heller O'Reilly is the current owner.

4. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

4.1 Description

Within the walls of this house are the stories of three major phases of construction. With devoted owners who have kept and passed on historical photographs and plans, these stories are also able to be passed on and shared. The original phase of construction began in 1882-3 with a Stick Style of architecture designed by Green & Wicks, Architects of Auburn, New York. The second phase occurred in 1936 with the conversion of the ocean-front/east portion of the house being converted into a performance space. The third phase of construction took place in 1997 with the demolition and reconstruction of the western portion of the house.

The existing, ocean-front, eastern portion of the house derived its current 2020 form in 1936 when Robert O'Connor, an acclaimed concert pianist, purchased and remodeled the original house. This house has an ocean-front (east), one-room performance space of approximately 52 feet by 32 ft with a 1-1/2-story addition to the rear, built in 1997 with living spaces and bedrooms. All of the current house footprint is believed to be the same as the original footprint.

The ocean-front portion of the house is a wood-framed, 1-1/2-story structure with its gable peak parallel to Ocean Avenue. The fenestration includes a variety of small-paned windows with double-hung 9/9, 8/12 sash and 10- and 15-light casement sash. Many of these windows appear in early photographs (See photos pages 12 and 13) and may be original. Many of the windows were restored in recent years by the current owner. In addition to unusual fenestration, the front of the house has two angled, shingled and trimmed walls forming a central area from the eave line to the grade of the lawn, similar to buttresses.

The north gable end has a symmetrical arrangement of windows including 9/9 double-hung sash at the corners and two sets of double 10-light casement sash at the center. The second level cathedral ceiling windows include a pyramidal, stacked collection of 6-light, 9-light, and 10-light sash. The south gable end fenestration mirrors the same 9/9 double-hung sash at the corners as the north gable end. There are large double doors at the center flanked by 10-light double-casement windows. The south gable end includes a second floor deck with a railing, central door and two side 9/9 windows. This deck forms a covered, open, columned brick patio and steps at the ground level.

The interior of the ocean-fronting portion of this house is one large, cathedral-ceiling room. There is an abundance of natural light from many windows on all sides and from two levels at the gable ends. There are four wood trusses of natural-finish wood with the bottom chord timber cased-in. All vertical-board walls, fireplace projection, panelings, columns, stairs, and trim match the dark natural-finish of the trusses. The floor is a narrow-width, natural-finish wood running north-south. The ceiling consists of an off-white painted fiberboard with wood battens at their seams.

The east/ocean side wall retains its slightly asymmetrical inset detailed on the exterior by the buttress-like walls. Opposite this inset with windows on all three sides and wood panels above the eave line, there is a projecting fireplace constructed of brick and detailed in vertical wood boards with a mantelshelf. There are bookshelves on both sides. The south gable end includes a full-width, wood-railed balcony accessed by an open wood stair. Below the balcony there are large, central double doors, each with 28-lights above a panel.

Some of the windows at the south end of the room have natural-finish, louvered wood shutters. Along the east and north walls runs a continuous valance box, often described as a pelmet box which conceals the fittings for curtains. Both curtains and interior wood shutters would have controlled lighting for this room particularly during its use as a performance space. Two simple chandeliers hang from the trusses.

At the west/fireplace wall, there are French doors leading into the west portion of the house, north and south of the fireplace. The west side of the house was reconstructed in 1997 on the original footprint of the 1883 house. This 1-1/2-story gabled addition includes the Kitchen, Dining Room, Office, Master Bedroom, three Bedrooms and Bathrooms. Although some of the drawings and current photographs from the 1997 and 2012 construction are included in this report, the detailed written description focuses on the historic ocean-front, east portion of the dwelling.

4.2 Alterations/Evolution

The original house at 37 Ocean Avenue can still be seen in the existing ocean-front portion of the house. What has survived includes the 1-1/2-story rectangular, gable form and footprint, most of the windows on the first floor, and the slightly central east wall inset.

From historical photographs and drawings, the description and of the original 1883 two-family dwelling is as follows:

As designed by Green & Wicks, Architects of Auburn, New York, this house exemplified the Stick Style of

architecture. This description is based upon exterior historical photographs and original architectural floor plans. There are questions, however, about the as-built interior design.

With extensions from the current gable roof, there was a wrap-around covered veranda (note: this is the term used on the original architect's drawings) on all four sides and through the middle area (noted as being 16-feet in width on the architect's plans) which divided rooms for the two cottages of two families of sisters. There were gable dormers serving second floor bedrooms, wood roof shingles, and exterior vertical board finishes. Trim boards at gable end facades suggested an imitation half-timber effect together with thin 'stick-like' porch posts with diagonal supports.

Wood porch railings had simple diagonal board detail. The house had a dark appearance from what appears to be natural-finish, unpainted wood. Windows were positioned tight to the corners of walls and dormers. The windows included all of the variations listed above that have survived.

The design by Green & Wicks placed two cottages of unequal size under the same roof surrounded and divided by verandas (See Floor Plans page 11). While the north 'cottage' had one 'Sitting Room' and one 'Bed Room', the south 'cottage' had a larger 'Sitting Room' and two 'Bed Rooms'. In the middle veranda were staircases to the second level. The design included twelve (12) 'Chambers' on the second floor divided by separate hallways and stairs. Many of the bedrooms had built-in window seats while the east/ocean-front central bedrooms shared a Balcony (This balcony does not appear in historical photographs and may not have been constructed). A south-facing balcony at the south gable end was added later or may have been constructed as a change to the original plans. See photos page 12 and 13.

On the first floor, west of the main house was one 'Dining Room', 'Kitchen' and two 'W.C's' (Water Closets/ Toilets). The 'Dining Room' had a fireplace at its west wall. Photos taken immediately prior to the 1997 reconstruction show what may have been the original west intersecting gable portion of the house. The chimney would have served the Dining Room and Kitchen as drawn on the original plans. Shed and gable dormers at the north and south elevations were located in second floor bedrooms. The photos also show a shed-roofed addition against the west wall of the rear gable portion of the house in an unusual intersection often referred to as a 'beverly jog' because the wall plane of the addition 'jogs' beyond the roof plane of the main house. See photos pages 16 and 17.

Questions remain about what was originally designed as a 'veranda' asymmetrically dividing the north and south 'cottages'. The historical photographs and Sanborn Maps do not show this opening. Actual construction may have included a connector wall, set back slightly from the front wall (as seen in the 1904 Sanborn Map), with an access door. This is what appears in historical photographs and maps and what has survived, minus the door. At some time in the 20th century, the central door would have been replaced with the two existing windows.

Early alterations from the original architect's plans may have included:

- · Construction of a connector wall between the two 'cottages' near the center of the east wall;
- · Construction of a south-facing second floor balcony.
- · Construction of a west, shed-roofed addition with a 'beverly jog'.

Alterations in 1936:

- Removal of interior walls, stairs, and the second floor framing to create one large room with a cathedral ceiling;
- · Removal of roof dormers, verandas, balconies;
- · Construction of exterior buttress-like walls at the slightly-centered east wall inset;
- · Construction of a south-facing entrance with second-level deck and columns and walkway;
- Within the new performance room: addition of roof trusses, balcony at south gable end, fireplace at the west wall, new door connections into the existing west portion of the house;
- · Interior, vertical wood wall material is believed to have been re-used from the original house.

An undated aerial photo page 14 shows this 1936 phase of the house. It is a rare photo that also shows the south-facing, west gable portion of the house and what may have been the original 1883 design. The gable intersects the main gable with a chimney, gable and shed dormers, and a shed roofed, west section that may have housed the 'water closets'.

Alterations in 1997:

- Removal of the 1883 west portion of the house;
- Construction of new 1-1/2-story dwelling spaces on the same 1883 footprint, designed by Lawrence M. Maury Associates, Inc.

Alterations in 2012:

· Second floor expansion with new bedrooms and bathroom by S. M. Roethke design, inc.

4.3 Character-Defining Features

Character-defining features include:

- North gable end fenestration;
- The asymmetrical fenestration and variations of window types in the east wall;
- · The east wall buttress-like walls;
- · A performance space with a balcony, trusses, cathedral ceiling and fireplace;
- · Original architectural plans and historical photographs.
- · A unique, original 1883 architectural plan for two-family housing.

5. PROPERTY INFORMATION

5.1 Property Identification:

37 Ocean Avenue, Nantucket Assessor's Map: 73.3.2, Parcel 49, .47 acres (approximately 20,419 square feet), zone ROH.

6. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

6.1 Published and Archival Resources

Inquirer and Mirror, 9/8/1888: Fresh Air Fund Fair held at Thalassa, Mrs. James B. Burbank's cottage, gotten up by Alice and Marion Burbank

Inquirer and Mirror, 1/10/1903: Mrs. Annie Frances Richards, one of Sconset's well-known summer residents, died

Inquirer and Mirror, 6/20/1908: Major James B. Burbank and family at Thalassa

Inquirer and Mirror, 5/27/1911: for rent, 10-room cottage next to Beach House, apply to Mrs. James B. Burbank

Inquirer and Mirror, 7/20/1912: for rent, 11-room cottage, apply to Mrs. James B. Burbank

Inquirer and Mirror, 7/16/1927: Colonel and Mrs. Newcomb are at their cottage, "Thalasse"

Inquirer and Mirror, 6/21/1930: Mrs. James B. Burbank, wife of General Burbank, died at Walter Reed Hospital

Inquirer and Mirror, 7/31/1937: recital at the O'Connor Studio

Inquirer and Mirror, 8/27/1949: "O'Connor Plays," description of concert at his studio before 100 guests

"Mary Wheeler Heller: 'The Studio' at 37 Ocean Avenue," Voices of the Village: An Oral History of 'Sconset, interviews by Nancy Anne Newhouse (The 'Sconset Trust, 2004), pp.45 -48

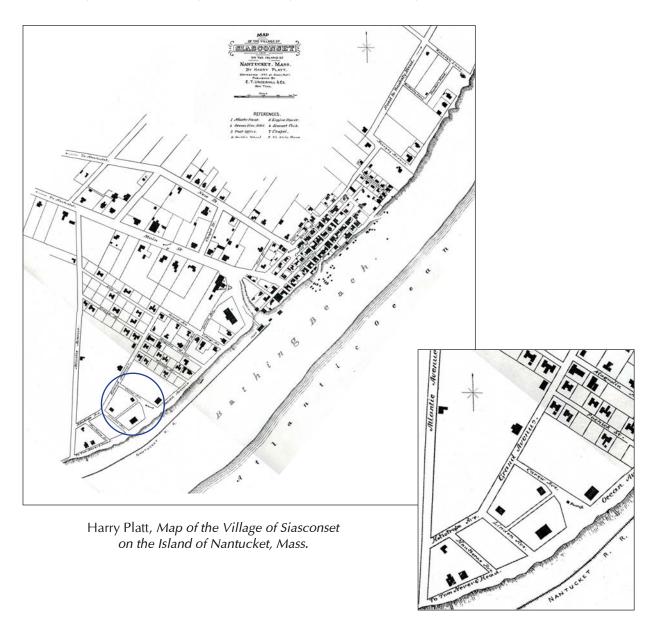
6.2 Historical Maps & Site Plan

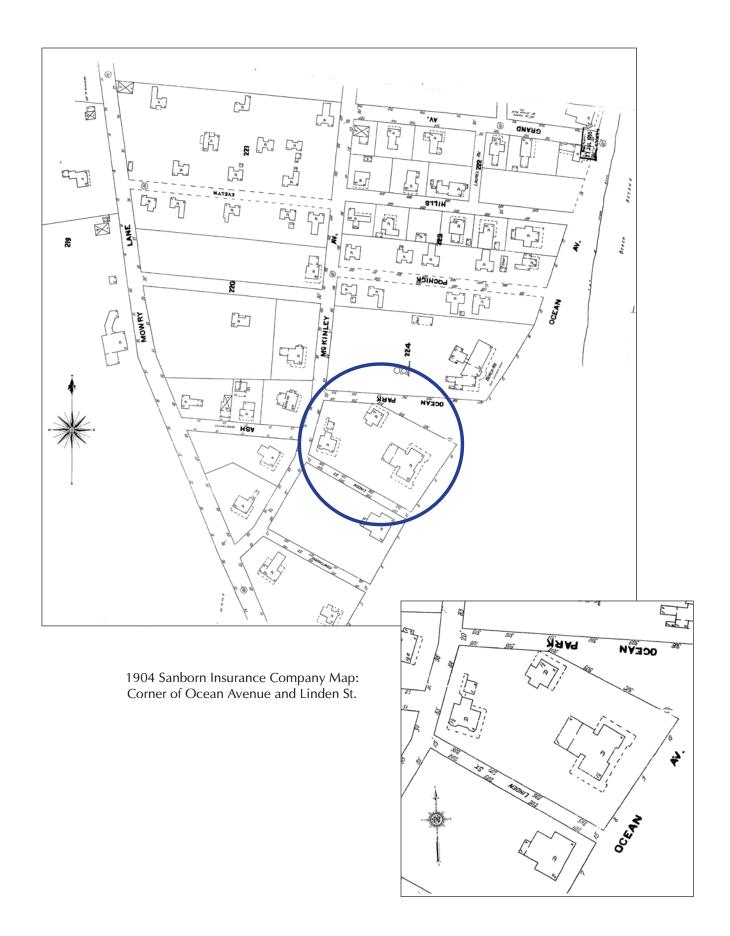
Harry Platt, Map of the Village of Siasconset on the Island of Nantucket, Mass. (E.T. Underhill, 1888)

Sanborn Insurance Company maps, 1904, 1909, 1923, 1949 all show Thalassa in its original configuration

Land Court Plan 40942-A, 1981

Floor Plans, 37 Ocean Avenue, Green & Wicks, Architects of Auburn, New York





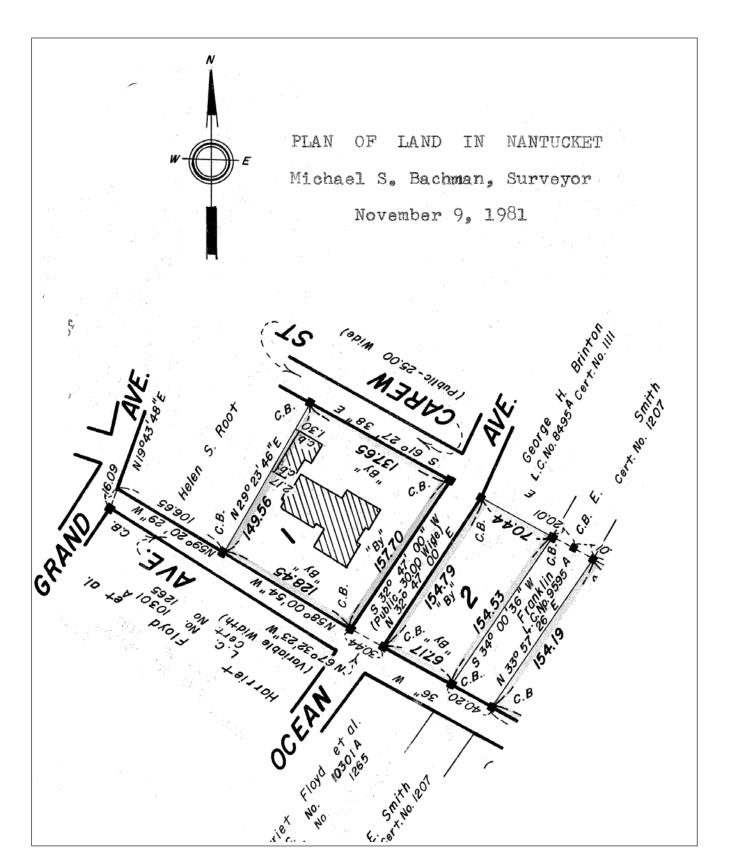




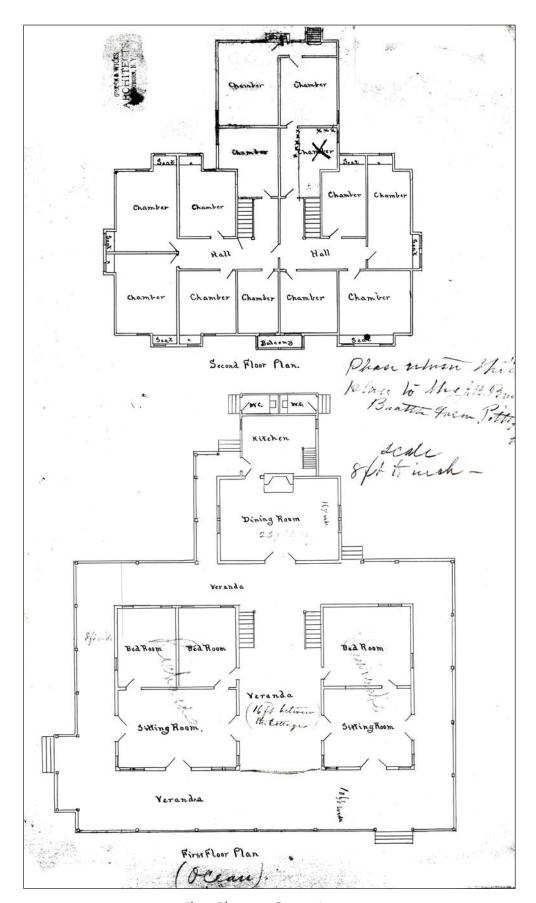
1923 Sanborn Insurance Company Map: Corner of Ocean Avenue and Linden St.



37 Ocean Avenue Siasconset Page 9



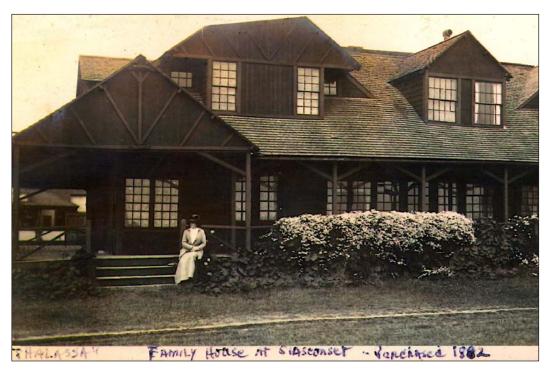
1981 Bachman Survey of 37 Ocean Avenue



Floor Plans, 37 Ocean Avenue, Green & Wicks, Architects of Auburn, New York

6.3 Historical Photographs: Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association and the Collection of the Heller O'Reilly Family

Heller O'Reilly Collection NHA PH23-53, aerial view, 1920s NHA SC612-74, houses along the South Bluff, Siasconset, 1910s NHA SC660-17, houses along the South Bluff, Siasconset, 1930s NHA SC687-3 aerial view, 1930s



Heller O'Reilly Collection: 1883 Ocean-front, east elevation showing original Stick Style architectural design



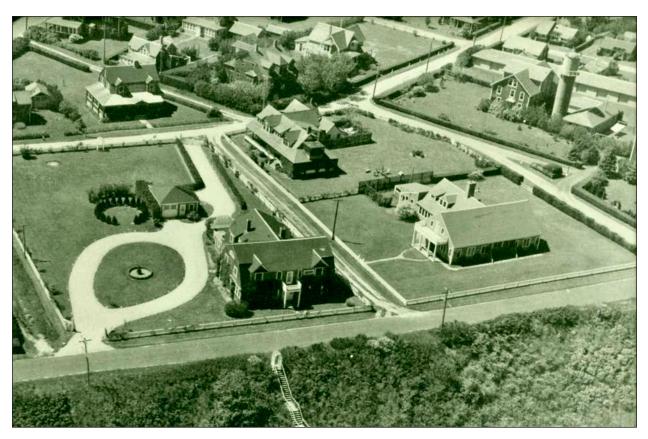
Heller O'Reilly Collection: Original east & south elevations, ca. 1910



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Original south elevation, ca. 1910



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Original east elevation, ca. 1910



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Aerial after 1936 remodeling; house is on the right



NHA PH23-53, aerial view, 1920s



NHA SC612-74: Houses along the South Bluff, ca. 1910 with 37 Ocean Avenue on the right



NHA PH23-53, aerial view, 1930s



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Interior northeast corner of post-1936 remodeling



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Southwest elevations with rear gable and shed-roofed portions of original house



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Ca 1997 south elevations with rear gable and shed-roofed portions of original house. Lower right photo shows the rear north elevation



Heller O'Reilly Collection: Ca 1997 south & east elevations showing lift for new foundation and curved buttresses with woven shingle courses





Heller O'Reilly Collection: Ca 1997 photo showing new buttress rebuilt to fit on new foundation with the elimination of the curve and woven shingle courses

6.4 Current Year 2020 Photographs



North & East Elevations



North Elevation



South Elevation



East Elevation



Buttress-like Walls, East Elevation



North Elevation & Garage Apartment



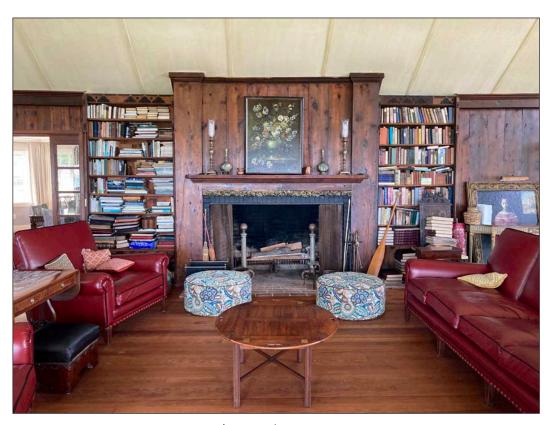
Performance Space Looking South



Chandeliers in Performance Space



East Wall Inset, Performance Space



Fireplace, Performance Space



Performance Space Looking North



North Wall Stacked Windows



South Wall Balcony



South Double Doors, Performance Space



Stairs to Balcony, Performance Space



South Double Doors, Performance Space



View East to the Ocean, Performance Space

6.5 Chain of Title

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 68, p. 307: Charles H Robinson & Franklin A. Ellis to Annie F. Richards (\$200), 4/13/1883.

Tract of land in Sunset Heights: House lot 2 fronting on Linden Ave., house lots 13 and the southern half of lot 12, fronting on Ocean Ave (SOUTH side of house)

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 68, p. 325: Charles H. Robinson & Franklin A. Ellis to Alice G. Burbank, Julia B. Burbank and Katherine Burbank (\$200), 8/24/1883.

Tract of land in Sunset Heights: house lot 1 fronting on Carew Ave; house lots 11 and the northern half of 12 (NORTH side of house)

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 68, p. 430: Annie F. Richards and Reuben A. Richards to Charles H. Robinson.

Mortgage \$1688 for south half of property and "new dwelling house recently erected."

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 68, p. 433: Alice Burbank and Katherine Burbank to Charles H. Robinson.

Mortgage \$1322 for north half of property and "new dwelling house recently erected."

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 107, p. 478: Alice B. Tweedy to [sister] Marion B. Knowles, 1935. One-half interest in Lot 1 fronting on Carew Avenue; Lot 11 and northern half of Lot 12, fronting on Ocean Avenue; as shown on Plan of Sunset Heights, Plan Book 2, p. 42. Intent of the deed is to release all interest in the property of her parents James B. and Alice G. Burbank

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 108, p. 140: Caroline Newcomb to Robert O'Connor, 1936. Lot 2 fronting on Linden Avenue; Lot 13 and southern half of Lot 12, fronting on Ocean Avenue; as shown on Plan of Sunset Heights, Plan Book 2, p. 42, with dwelling house and buildings thereon, plus another parcel beginning at the corner of Ocean and Linden Avenues, and running to the high water mark below the bank.

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 108, p. 141: Marion B. Knowles to Robert O'Connor, 1936. Lot 1 fronting on Carew Avenue; Lot 11 and northern half of Lot 12, fronting on Ocean Avenue; as shown on Plan of Sunset Heights, Plan Book 2, p. 42, with the dwelling house and buildings thereon.

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 113, p. 297: Robert O'Connor to Gladys L. Wheeler, 1951. Lot 1 fronting on Carew Avenue, lot 2 fronting on Linden Avenue and lots 11, 12, 13 fronting on Ocean Avenue, as shown on Plan of Sunset Heights, Plan Book 2, p. 42, with dwelling house, furniture, furnishings and all buildings, plus another parcel beginning at the corner of Ocean and Linden Avenues, and running to the high water mark below the bank.

Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Book 188, p. 63: Leroy C. Wheeler, admin. of the estate of Gladys L. Wheeler to Mary W. Heller, 1958.

Lot 1 fronting on Carew Avenue, lot 2 fronting on Linden Avenue and lots 11, 12, 13 fronting on Ocean Avenue, as shown on Plan of Sunset Heights, Plan Book 2, p. 42, with dwelling house, furniture, furnishings and all buildings, plus another parcel beginning at the corner of Ocean and Linden Avenues, and running to the high water mark below the bank.

Massachusetts Land Court Certificate 24619: Mary W. Heller to James F. Downey, trustee of the Mary W. Heller 2009 Family Trust Agreement, 2012.

Lots 1, 2, 3 Plan 40942-A, and Lot 4, Plan 9595-F, 2012