

**HISTORIC DISTRICT &
HISTORIC PROPERTY
COMMISSION**

Allison Sanders, Chair
Lisa Pojano, Vice-Chair
Gilbert Weatherly, Clerk
Jeffrey Bendremer
Lori Fusco

Alternates
Pam Brown
Peter Gaboriault
Alice Schroeder



**TOWN HALL
238 Danbury Road
Wilton, Connecticut 06897**

**Historic District Commission Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, June 3, 2022 Electronic Meeting: 7:30 pm**

Minutes:

I. Call to order: 7:31 pm

- a. Attendance: Commissioners Sanders, Weatherly, Bendremer and Fusco present. Alternate Brown present.
- b. Minutes: April 5 minutes are tabled for the next meeting. April 14 minutes Fusco motions to approve, Sanders seconds, and vote to approve is unanimous. April 28 minutes Sanders motions to approve, Bendremer seconds and vote to approve is unanimous.

II. 475 Danbury Road: removal of antique barn without permit: Allison Sanders updates Commission about the status of action by the Building Department. Owner is still required to file a demolition permit after which further action can occur.

<https://gis.vgsi.com/Wilton/Parcel.aspx?Pid=1629>

III. HRI Survey needed for houses dated 1940 – 1970?: Gil Weatherly reports that SHPO is supportive of a grant application. After discussion it is determined to wait until the Town is confirmed as a certified local government before evaluating other projects that may warrant funding, then applying for a specific grant. Public comment received after last meeting is attached.-

IV. Infrastructure repairs to town-owned building on HRI, Ambler Farm “Yellow House” and Town Hall Façade Columns: Allison Sanders reports that the “Yellow House” funding awaits a presentation to the BOS by Friends of Ambler Farm before final approval. Town Hall façade is funded.

V. Public Comment: None

VI. Adjournment: 8:01 pm

Submitted by Gilbert Weatherly, Clerk

Next Meeting: September 6, 2022

Minthorn
23 Henry Austin Drive
Wilton, CT 06897

April 8, 2022

Dear Allison Sanders,

Mel and I are so glad that Wilton's HDPC is considering preserving the modest houses built here before the age of McMansions. So many are charming, and they are part of the history of their neighborhoods.

We live in a pre-fab kit house that was built in 1952 by my grandfather (William Wilcox), his son (Wm., Jr.), and his nephew (Lyle Tallmadge) on Henry Austin Drive. My grandfather was great friends with the Hurlbutt family and when Harry decided to sell the ten acres of apple orchard here, my grandfather and my Uncle Bill each bought a parcel. Harry (Henry) named the street after his first and middle names.

We have the original receipt for the house, and I plan to ask P&Z if the original application and permit are on file. The one thing we do not know is which company sold the house to my grandfather. The model number is on the receipt, but not the company name. We always thought it was Sears, but they stopped selling them before ours was built. It may have been Montgomery Ward. In any case, there were several companies selling them in the 1950's.

The house has the original siding under the cedar siding we have on now. And our yard has what may be the only original apple tree from the Hurlbutt orchard on the street...and we are trying to keep that dear old tree going.

We are so delighted that the buildings on Riverside Avenue in Westport that my grandfather had for his first and second boatyards (Saugatuck Boatyard) are still standing. The first boatyard by the train station (under the I-95 bridge) is still there. The second, up the river across from the golf course, is now a restaurant.

We have our fingers crossed that Wilton will consider preserving houses like ours, not only because they are a part of the town's history, but also because they provide affordable housing. My grandparents raised me and I grew up in this house...and graduated from WHS in 1960...so there is a lot of nostalgia attached to this property and this neighborhood.

Good luck in your endeavors.

Regards,

Gail Minthorn

Gail Minthorn

Mrs. Melvin J. Minthorn

Mail-order kit houses now seen as treasures

By RUTH MULLEN
Of The Indianapolis Star

The American Dream was just a mailbox away.

At the turn of the century, thousands of Americans bought their homes by mail and then eagerly awaited their arrival by rail — each in more than 30,000 pieces, pre-cut and ready to assemble, down to the last doorknob and downspout.

"If you liked Tudor Revival houses, you could order one even if you lived in Kansas," said Katherine Stevenson, co-author of "Houses By Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company." "There's a certain fascination with having a house that came out of a catalog. And they're very nice houses that are aesthetically pleasing to people."

Between 1908 and 1940, Sears Roebuck and Co. manufactured and sold an estimated 100,000 houses through their Modern Homes catalog. There were more than 450 designs, from \$650 to more than \$5,000 for a 10-room mansion with fluted columns, a curving walnut banister and a handsome glass solarium.

"Today, kit houses are considered historic treasures, and interest in them has been building since these modest, well-built homes were 'discovered' by preservationists in the early 1980s."

"Sears houses were very much aimed at the average middle-class homeowner," said Paul Diebold, an architectural historian with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. "And their average home was every bit as good or better than what was available locally."

Many a new homeowner was charmed by

built-in window seats, leaded-glass china cabinets and high-quality woodwork, features that often are too costly to include in new homes today.

"The house just spoke to me," recalled

Binky Grey, who unwittingly bought a Sears home in Indianapolis with her husband, Denham, in 1996. "It had the character I was looking for. We just loved it from the start."

The homes allowed buyers to become an integral part of the design process. Customers could reverse floor plans, remove entire rooms or add on a garage or sleeping porch. Sears even had an interior designer on staff to help decorate.

"With mail order houses, it was the first time you could pick out the design, right down to the varnish and the paint," said Kipp Normand, architectural reviewer and historian for the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission. "There was this whole notion that you were getting a really good product that was guaranteed."

Mail-order houses closely resembled mainstream styles, from trendy arts and crafts bungalows and foursquares in the late teens to revival styles in the '20s and English cottages and Cape Cods in the '30s.

In many ways, kit houses were the first generation of modern homes, Stevenson said. Clean, compact and efficient, they all came outfitted with electricity, telephone service and indoor plumbing.

As the U.S. economic boom continued through the '20s, many thrifty Sears customers assembled their new homes themselves.

"It made quality housing available for working-class folks," Normand said. "It was

very difficult for the average person to get a mortgage at that time."

Every stud, rafter, joist and molding was provided a 76-page instruction manual to guide new homeowners every step of the way.

"It certainly saved a lot of time, and that was becoming more important," Diebold said. "Mail-order housing introduced full-fledged prefabrication in a way that really hadn't been done before."

Other national mail-order companies, such as Montgomery Ward and Aladdin Ready-Cut Homes, also sold kit houses, but Sears was by far the best-known. This standing was buoyed in part by the company's liberal financing plans and iron-clad guarantee.

(As early as 1911, Sears offered generous financing plans. That policy came back to haunt the company during the Depression, when it foreclosed on thousands of unpaid mortgages.)

In 1937, the Sears Modern Homes department was shut down, though leftover stock was sold until 1940.

Today, the search is on to find and record these homes that revolutionized the building industry. It won't be easy because much of Sears' records were destroyed when the Modern Homes department was dissolved.

Such discoveries are worth the effort, though, Stevenson said.

"They've been listed on the National Register in (historic) districts all over the United States," she said. "You often find them in neighborhoods where people have kept up a sense of place and architectural quality. They certainly have withstood the test of time."

KAT News Service