

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

RICHARD ALSOP IV 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: Richard Alsop IV House

Other Name/Site Number: Davison Art Center

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 301 High Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Middletown

Vicinity

State: Connecticut County: Middlesex Code: 007

Zip Code: 06459

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

- buildings
- sites
- structures
- objects
- 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 ___ 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/secondary structure
Current:	Recreation and Culture	Sub:	museum
	Education	Sub:	educational facility/library

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Early Republic: Early Classical Revival: Regency
Mid-19th Century: Greek Revival, Italian Villa

MATERIALS:

Foundation: sandstone
Walls: stucco over load-bearing brick
Roof: metal
Other:

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Summary

Realized in a number of campaigns between 1839 and ca. 1860, the wall paintings of the Richard Alsop IV House in Middletown, Connecticut, are nationally significant examples of nineteenth-century decorative wall painting once common in American domestic settings, but now largely lost as tastes changed or the materials degraded. The wall painting enlivened the new house that Richard Alsop IV built for his mother between 1836 and 1839; although believed to be used on the exterior for reasons of economy in place of marble ornament, the painting was fully in keeping with fashionable decorative trends of the period. The artists, thought to be recent Italian and German immigrants, utilized a variety of stylistic sources—ancient, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century—from which to derive subject matter and approaches for artistic organization and representation in devising the interior painting programs. Ultimately, the house was embellished with colorful wall panels in the neoclassical modes stylistically referred to as “Pompeian” or “Empire,” fanciful cage-like frames and realistic native birds and plants, and *grisaille* trompe l’oeil statues and faux stonework. An extremely rare antebellum survivor, the house and its painted decoration remained in the Alsop family for over one hundred years and continue to be the focus of studies and monitoring by present owner and steward Wesleyan University. With regard to the wall paintings, Peter M. Kenny, the Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, recently observed: “these unique and irreplaceable treasures are truly part of our national cultural patrimony.”¹

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Site and Immediate Landscape

The Richard Alsop IV House is set back from the west side of High Street on a slight rise, overlooking the Connecticut River to the east. Located in a fashionable nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century residential district now part of the Wesleyan University campus, the original house consists of a two-story main block with lower flanking wings and an extended three-story rear ell, for a total of 4,800 square feet on the first floor). The load-bearing brick walls are set on a brownstone foundation and covered in rose-beige stucco that is scored to resemble ashlar stonework. The house is now joined to the once freestanding Alsop carriage house, also brick and stucco, which, along with several modern additions, houses the Davison Art Center library and gallery.

The two-acre site encompasses the original lot on High Street set aside for the house in 1835. It is enclosed on the east by an iron fence that runs the length of the 270-foot High Street frontage. Original openwork iron posts frame the driveway to the parking lot on the north; the gates are missing. This was one of two original entrances for a semi-circular driveway in front of the house. Other nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century houses on this side of the street partially screen the block’s interior three acres of which was formerly part of the Alsop property. Most of this acreage is now occupied by the Center for the Arts, the university’s large, modern art complex consisting of a series of limestone buildings connected by underground passageways.

Little remains of the landscaped grounds around the house depicted in *Great Georgian Houses of America* (1933, 1937); however, based on style and remaining plant material the landscaping probably dated from the late nineteenth century.² The most notable feature, a large parterre garden with a central terrace south of the ell, was replaced in 1982 by a paved stone courtyard of similar size. The three-stage, cast-iron fountain in the courtyard may have been moved from another location on the site. Mature specimen trees still frame the house,

¹ Peter M. Kenny, Curator of American Decorative Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 17 June 2004, letter attached to e-mail message to Alain Munkittrick, 18 June 2004. Copy in Alsop House National Historic Landmark file.

² Despite the title, Alsop House and a number of other nineteenth-century dwellings were included in *Great Georgian Houses of America*, originally published in two volumes released in 1933 and 1937, and reprinted by Dover in 1970.

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with maples planted along the sidewalk in front of the fence and maples and elms along the north property line. Inside the fence at the left front is a large copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica* var. *atropunicea*), a varietal type not imported until after 1850. Another specimen beech of the same age and type was saved when the art complex was constructed.

Exterior

The cubic, three-bay main block has a shallow hipped roof with internal wood gutters and wide, overhanging, eaves detailed with exposed decorative rafter ends and a wood fascia. Four stuccoed brick chimneys with half-cylindrical metal caps extend well above the tin-shingled roof.³ A painted frieze with a swag and tassel pattern extends around three sides under the eaves. The wraparound veranda, which runs across the entire façade, has a wood deck bordered by a low brownstone perimeter wall, with brownstone steps at the north end of the veranda and at the end of each of the wings. The sections of the veranda enveloping the main block are Regency in character. The bell-cast roof over the center section, presently covered with rolled asphalt, returns to the wing colonnades. Surmounted by a delicate iron balustrade that extends across the tall second-floor casement windows, the roof is supported by decorative pierced flat iron posts with applied ornamental castings and displays narrow openwork spandrels under the eaves.

The fenestration of the main block consists of casement windows and French doors with large panes set within narrow wood frames. The floor-to-ceiling French doors and windows along the veranda have wood jambs, decorative wood caps with flat scrolled brackets, and narrow wood moldings along the vertical edges. Exterior tracks in these jambs may have been used for some type of rolling screens or blinds. Several of these doors were converted to triple-hung windows in the 1870s. The remainder of the casements are set within plain masonry openings; pintels remain in the jambs, but the louvered blinds are missing.

The lower, hipped-roof wings are detailed with a full entablature and carried on Doric-order piers and pilasters. On the first floor, the facade walls feature slightly recessed *grisaille* trompe l'oeil paintings of statues on plinths set in niches, depicting Victory (south wing), Erato (center facade), and Juno (north wing). Second-floor panels contain trompe l'oeil urns. These five painted panels are mid-twentieth-century copies of the originals, which exist behind the panels in a degraded, but now stabilized state. The house's main, east-facing entrance, located at the inside bay of the north wing, contains the original four-panel wood door. A conservatory constructed of wood was added at the rear of the south wing about 1870. Originally enclosed with glazed doors, it now has tall windows on the south and west elevations. The roof parapet of the conservatory is divided by plinths with round-arched caps, detailed with stylized acroteria.

The long rear ell, measuring 28' x 60', once housed the kitchens and servants' quarters. Originally two stories, a third floor appeared about 1870. On the north elevation, bands of windows in groups of two and three are set into the upper-level walls with some single windows on the first floor. A full-length, Doric-order colonnade on the south elevation originally opened directly to the garden area now occupied by the stone courtyard. Enclosed as a corridor during the 1949-52 restoration/renovation campaign, the colonnade now has three-part windows and panels between the piers; interior wall pilasters remain in place. There are single windows at the upper levels of this elevation.

³ The original specifications called for tin roofing; the present shingles date from about 1900. See Alsop House Files, Special Collections and Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University (hereafter SCAOL), Middletown, Connecticut.

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Interior Plan

The disposition of the first-floor public and semi-public rooms at the Alsop House were, in the opinion of historian Talbot Hamlin, “conveniently arranged for living and entertaining on the grand scale.”⁴ The house is entered through a vestibule in the north wing of the house. To the left, the vestibule gives onto the stairhall, to the right it once opened onto an alcove of the library, also located in the north wing and later renovated into restrooms. The main block contains the central stairhall, double parlors to the east, facing the house’s front, and a large dining room in the southwest corner. The main block also once included a pantry and service stair backing up to the main stair. These spaces were eliminated for a connecting corridor with the rest of the university’s art center. The morning room is situated in the south wing, south of the dining room, with a marble-floored conservatory behind, also opening onto the dining room. Windows and doors throughout are framed with Greek Revival casework bearing convex corner blocks and back-band moldings. All the principal rooms on the first floor have marble fireplaces with cast-iron grates. Interior shutters that fold back against the angled jambs of the doors and windows are fastened in place. The kitchen and other service rooms in the long, rear (west-facing) service ell have been combined into a single lecture room and projection booth and the formerly open, south-facing porch, enclosed and used for interior circulation. Second-floor bedrooms are now used for faculty offices.

Interior Wall Painting

The exterior trompe l’oeil only hints at the scope and diversity of the interior painted decoration. The frescoes are found throughout the first floor of the house in six contiguous rooms. In the double parlors, wall panels feature dancing girls and over-mantel panels with garlanded tripods and cupids in the classical manner. The ceilings feature large framed roundels within double squares. Surrounded by semi-circular festoons, the images in the roundels depict the “Chariot of Apollo” in the north parlor and the “Car of Jupiter” in the south. Geometric borders frame ceiling fields that are decorated with flowers, birds, insects, and winged victories. In the dining room, a medallioned frieze further embellished with fruit and flowers extends around the top of the papered walls.

The trompe l’oeil murals in the morning room are composed of arched openings defined by wickerwork, giving the illusion of windows with the sky beyond. Utilizing a richer, brighter, color scheme than the parlor frescoes, they are decorated with vines and other flora and fauna painted in a naturalistic manner, including birds that are said to be exact copies of engravings in Alexander Wilson’s *American Ornithology* (1808-1814). On the ceiling, a large square center panel with a floral medallion is flanked by narrow filigree panels. Larger panels with latticework borders at either end are simplified versions of the wall murals. Although not as extensive or elaborate, a small mural on the foyer wall is similar in concept, depicting a vista through a marble colonnade, with a flower pot on the painted sill the only spot of color.

Later fresco work is found in the stairhall, which contains a partially suspended, semi-elliptical staircase illuminated by a domical skylight. The double mahogany balustrades, which have slim turned balusters and molded handrails, terminate in spiral volutes at newel posts composed of multiple balusters. The closet under the intermediate stair landing is a replacement for an original supporting Ionic column. The west wall of the stairhall was painted in *grisaille* trompe l’oeil to resemble marble masonry with a sculptured frieze and cornice. The swag in the frieze is detailed with urns and angels; the six-foot niches contain representations of statues in the style of sculptor Antonio Canova.

⁴ Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (1944; repr., New York: Dover Books, 1964), 177.

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Legacy and Integrity

The house remained in the Alsop family for a little over a century. Aimee Alsop, Richard Alsop IV's widow, purchased the house at public auction in 1849. She never lived there on any permanent basis, instead recognizing her mother-in-law's life tenancy and the residency of her sister-in-law, Frances. Maria Dana died in 1861 and Frances Alsop in 1868. Upon her own death in 1879, Aimee willed the house to her husband's niece, Mary Alsop Oliver Alsop, and her husband Joseph, who had also been living there since the 1860s. Sometime around 1870, Joseph and Mary embarked on the only major period of alteration occurring during the Alsop family tenancy. This campaign enlarged the dining room to the west and created a new conservatory in the southwest corner of the house, adjacent to the dining and morning rooms. A third floor was also added to the rear service ell at this time. The enlargement of the dining room was the likely cause for the original room's frescoes to be papered over. Mary Alsop outlived her husband and son dying in 1892. After her death, ownership of the house passed through numerous family members. For a period, it functioned as the fraternity house for the Gamma Zeta chapter of Delta Tau Delta. The last person to occupy the house was a visiting professor, Count Carlo Sforza, the Italian foreign minister, who lived there in 1927.⁵ It stood largely vacant for the next twenty years until Wesleyan University purchased it from family members in June 1948 with funds provided by alumnus George W. Davison and his wife, Harriet.⁶ This purchase was the first stage of a larger initiative by the Davisons to acquire the house, restore portions of it (mainly the public rooms with the wall paintings), and renovate other portions to house both the Davison Print Collection they had donated to the university and related functions. The renovation project spanned from 1949 to 1952.

A year after taking ownership, Wesleyan assembled a restoration team to focus on the exterior panels and the walls and ceilings of some of the interior rooms. Richard Buck, head of the Conservation Department at the Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University led the restoration team with assistance from Thaddeus Beck.⁷ The degraded state of the exterior panels was of greatest concern and among the earliest jobs completed. Damage from weathering seems to have been a problem within decades of their initial completion. Similarities of technique between the trompe l'oeil statues on the exterior and those in the stairhall suggest that artist William Borgelt may have done some early restoration work when he was commissioned to paint the stairhall around 1860. Additional touch-ups and repairs were made to them over the course of the century. Buck ultimately hired New York artist Allyn Cox to replicate the exterior panels because their damage was so extensive. Cox commented on the state of the panels in a 1950 article:

when called by the University to work on these exterior paintings, I found that the dilapidation had progressed so far since [Edward] Allen's photographs [ca. 1926] as to make them totally ineffective as decoration...The original paint, as well as the various layers covering it, was cracked and loose and scaling, though the plaster was remarkably sound and firm. On expert advice, the remains of the original paintings, with the accumulation of repaintings and repairs, were coated with a wax composition.⁸

⁵ Anne Beha Associates, Inc., "Alsop House/Davison Art Center: Restoration Master Plan," February 1997, Boston, Massachusetts, 13. Copy provided by Davison Art Center.

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, "Alsop House Wall Paintings," accessed 12 October 2007, http://www.wesleyan.edu/dac/hous/house_paintings.html.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes and information in this section about the 1949 conservation and replication work for the exterior painting is drawn from: Allyn Cox, "The Wall Paintings of the Alsop House," *The Magazine Antiques* 58 (September 1950): 174-176.

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After stabilizing the originals, Cox replicated them on plywood, “covering the originals but held away from the old surface by about an inch.” He added: “fortunately, the niches were deep enough so that the new work could be secured with wood moldings and still give the effect of sunk panels.”

On the interior, Buck and his team engaged in a comprehensive restoration of the double parlors and morning room. As with the exterior panels, some of the restoration of the decorative finishes in these rooms predated university ownership. Paint analysis by several conservators, most recently in 1997, generally confirmed that the earliest retouching is found on the dancing girls and their surroundings in the parlors and on the morning room murals.⁹ The Buck-led, mid-twentieth-century conservation included in-painting and wax adhesion of flaking paint. Except for the ceiling roundels in the parlors and their immediate surrounds, most of their work was subsequently coated with a synthetic varnish. At this time, metal strapping and disks were installed to stabilize the plaster ceilings in the double parlors; these were painted to blend in with the designs. In the stairhall, the restoration and stabilization included the replacement of the single Ionic column underpinning the semi-elliptical stair at its landing with a closet for additional support.

The university hired the architectural firm of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon of New York for the renovations to the service ell and carriage house.¹⁰ The \$400,000 project enclosed the rear porch, using it and an addition to connect the ell and the carriage house.¹¹ The service spaces of the ell were given over to a lecture room and an art library and offices retrofitted into the former carriage house. A new cruciform gallery and art vault was also completed as part of this project. These were added on the south side of the connector and frame the west side of the courtyard. The gallery was detailed to echo the design of the house. Commenting on the new Davison Art Center in a 1954 article, Samuel M. Green, an art professor at Wesleyan, stated:

in the transformation of the old house into the new Art Center, no important part of the original Alsop property has been changed, except the stable, which was remodeled into studios, though retaining its fine exterior...Classrooms, exhibition space and office areas are mostly in the former utility areas of the old house and in additions.¹²

Notably, with regard to the painted interior decoration, Green stated that “since little of the original painting was badly damaged, the present effect is substantially what it was when the painting was new.”¹³ At the time, a project such as this—mixing conservation, adaptive reuse, and new construction—was considered an acceptable preservation practice. Upon the dedication of the art center, Henry-Russell Hitchcock is reported to have pronounced that “the adaptation of old houses to suitable new uses, when properly conducted, as here, is in effect the only sound method of preserving distinguished work of the past.”¹⁴

Since the 1950s, Wesleyan University has remained committed to the preservation of the Alsop House wall painting with several later studies focusing on the continued conservation of the house’s decorative art.

⁹ See “Restoration of Decorative Finishes,” prepared by conservators from Conservation Center at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Anne Beha Associates, Inc., 35-50, which builds upon earlier work.

¹⁰ Laura M. Edmiston, “The Davison Art Center and Alsop House,” 30 July 1994, p. 1, Davison Art Center Library (hereafter DACL), Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut; Anne Beha Associates, “Alsop House/Davison Art Center: Restoration Master Plan,” 14.

¹¹ In 1960, a print reference library and curator’s office was added to the south side of the carriage house.

¹² Samuel M. Green, “Wesleyan’s New Art Center,” *College Art Journal* 13 (Spring 1954): 221.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ As quoted in Green, “Wesleyan’s New Art Center,” 219.

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In 1997, a report entitled “Alsop House/Davison Art Center Restoration Master Plan” was prepared by Anne Beha Associates, Inc., of Boston. Its primary purpose was “to resolve outstanding issues raised in prior studies of the Alsop House and to prepare recommendations for the implementation of conservation and restoration treatments.”¹⁵ Towards this end, the report included a comprehensive program for the conservation of the frescoes based on a detailed analysis by the Conservation Center at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Despite the report and accompanying optimism, very little of the suggested plan-of-action was implemented. In May 2007, the Friends of the Davison Art Center Ad Hoc Committee on the Alsop House conducted a “Building Assessment Survey” of the Alsop House/Davison Art Center, which noted: “For whatever reasons, as a result of who-knows-what priorities a decade ago, this splendid and costly report was and remains ignored...During the intervening ten years, almost to the day, there has been a good deal of both encouraging and discouraging talk, but again, little action.”¹⁶ While the tone of the Friends report was pessimistic and the accompanying photographs depict differing levels of degradation—cracks, flaking, and some more serious water damage on the undecorated ceiling around the stairhall skylight—the wall paintings remain in good condition. A recent letter from the new Wesleyan president, Michael S. Roth, underscores the university’s commitment to preserving the Alsop wall paintings. He states:

The conservation of the Alsop House wall paintings has arisen as one of our most compelling priorities as I have surveyed the campus community during my first few months as president. Our faculty and curatorial staff believe strongly in the historic and cultural importance of the frescoes, given their early provenance and their rarity. I share their urgent sense that we must act swiftly to ensure that they remain intact and true in terms of their original expression.¹⁷

This stated commitment has already translated into physical reality with a project that occurred in June 2008 to restore the paint and plaster finishes of the second floor hallway ceiling and oculus. Clare Rogan, curator of the Davison Art Center, subsequently described the process:

The work on the plaster took approximately two weeks, including testing for humidity and acidity to determine curing. The paint restoration took approximately one week. At the oculus, efflorescent plaster and loose and peeling paint were removed from the plaster and wood substrate. The decorative painting at the oculus was documented, and paint losses were restored by John Canning Studios personnel. The entire hallway ceiling was repaired with a skim coat of plaster, primer, and paint.¹⁸

¹⁵ Anne Beha Associates, “Alsop House/Davison Art Center: Restoration Master Plan,” 3.

¹⁶ Friends of the Davison Art Center Ad Hoc Committee on the Alsop House, “Alsop House/Davison Art Center Building Assessment Survey,” Wesleyan University, 21 May 2007, 4.

¹⁷ Michael S. Roth to James A. Jacobs, 9 January 2008, letter in the Alsop House file, NHL Program, National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NHL)

¹⁸ “Restoration of paint and plaster finishes at the second floor hallway ceiling and oculus, June 5 - July 2, 2008,” statement forwarded to NHL staff along with digital images by Clare Rogan, Curator, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, 17 September 2008.

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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_ C_X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A_ B_ C_ D_ E_ F_ G

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
2. Visual and performing arts

Areas of Significance: Art: painting, decorative arts

Period(s) of Significance: 1839 - ca. 1860

Significant Dates:

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Landra Beach Platt and Francis Benne, architects (New Haven, Connecticut)
Sage & Baldwin, builders (Middletown, Connecticut)
Nicola Monachesi, artist (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), for work completed in 1839 or shortly after
William Borgelt, artist (Middletown, Connecticut), for ca. 1860 work

Historic Contexts: XXVI. Decorative and Folk Art

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

The extant wall painting in the Richard Alsop IV House in Middletown, Connecticut, completed in a number of stages between 1839 and ca. 1860 is distinguished by its exceptional scope and artistic quality. It has been called by art historian Samuel M. Green “unique in the domestic architecture of America.”¹⁹ Other commentaries range from references to the wall painting as “the most elaborate program of decoration” in an antebellum house to the opinion that they were “unrivaled by any in the country at that time except those in the National Capitol.”²⁰ In style, execution, and effect, the Alsop House is a notable moment in an artistic continuum that embraced contemporary European sources and extended back through the Italian Renaissance to Roman antiquity. Drawing on these sources, the artists—likely recent Italian and German immigrants—crafted a series of impressive painted rooms variously embellished using a range of stylized motifs, mythological subject matter, trompe l’oeil effects, and intricately detailed flora and fauna. As an ensemble, the Alsop House wall paintings are an invaluable graphic demonstration of nineteenth-century domestic decoration in the United States.

The superior design and application of the wall painting and the extensiveness of the program, alone, makes a solid case for national significance; however, the rarity of such a survival firmly establishes this significance. As buildings age, interiors are generally at greatest risk of alteration or loss as functions and taste change. This tendency is arguably most pronounced in houses as each passing generation desires to individualize their domestic environments in order to better support personal comfort or reflect prevailing aesthetic trends. The century-long ownership of the house by the family that constructed it and commissioned the wall paintings undoubtedly made such a survival possible. Upon acquisition of the house in 1948, Wesleyan University immediately understood the uniqueness of these paintings, and over almost sixty years of stewardship have made the preservation and understanding of the history an ongoing concern of the institution.

Richard Alsop IV

Traditionally named for its association with Richard Alsop IV (1789-1842), the mansion was built by Alsop for his twice-widowed mother, Maria Wyllys Pomeroy Alsop Dana (1767-1861), in 1839.²¹ Richard IV’s father, Richard Alsop III (1761-1815), was a classical scholar and member of the Hartford Wits, a well-known group of political satirists active during the Federal period. Known as the “millionaire poet,” Richard III inherited vast wealth from the mercantile and trading activities of two prior generations. His father, Richard Alsop II (1726-1776), had entered the lucrative West Indies trade, undoubtedly capitalizing on connections initially made by the activities of his grandfather, Richard Alsop I, who had arrived in America by way of Barbados in the 1680s.

Despite having failed to make his mark as an apprentice in the family trading company, Richard IV still attained great success as an international trader and banker after leaving Middletown. In 1820, he established Alsop & Co. in Valparaiso, Chile, where he made a fortune in South American trade, banking, and silver mining, a venture that allowed Alsop to retire from active business in 1829, although he retained a partnership in the

¹⁹ Green, “Wesleyan’s New Art Center,” 220.

²⁰ Samuel M. Green, *American Art: A Historical Survey* (New York: Ronald, 1966), 193, for “elaborate,” quote and Edward B. Allen, *Early American Wall Paintings, 1710-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), 101, for “unrivaled” quote.

²¹ The National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Alsop House dated 1970, perpetuated the family tradition that the house was built for Alsop and his wife, one of several misconceptions corrected in the present document through recent research.

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company.²² Richard IV returned to Philadelphia that year and became a director of the Bank of the United States. Upon his death in 1842, he left the bulk of his personal estate valued at \$258,914 to his wife, French émigré Aimee Garcin; the couple had no children.

Alsop Commissions a House in Middletown

Three years before his death, Richard IV oversaw the completion of a grand house for his mother, whose second husband, Samuel Whittlesey Dana, had died in 1830. In 1835, he purchased the lot next door to his deceased stepfather's house, which three years prior he had bought and deeded back to his mother. Alsop also put the new parcel in his mother's name, and language contained in a deed related to setback restrictions for new construction suggests that he was already planning a house on the property for his mother.

Although for many years this house was believed to have been the work of Ithiel Town or one of his protégés, it was actually the work of the short-lived New Haven firm of Platt & Benne.²³ The partnership of Landra Beach Platt (1812-1887) and Francis Benne (dates unknown) was a typical one for the antebellum period, with Platt being a former housewright and Benne having a background in drafting. They came together under the professional aegis of architect Sidney Mason Stone (1803-1888), who had previously worked for Town. Although the first notice about the firm of Platt & Benne appearing in New Haven's *Columbian Register* in August 1836 announced that the firm had taken over Stone's former office, a newspaper advertisement in December indicated that the three architects remained "associated together," perhaps as mentor and mentees.²⁴ At least Platt & Benne, if not all three, collaborated on plans submitted for the Washington Monument competition the following year.²⁵

While Platt & Benne's professional background and training had parallels with virtually every successful architect in antebellum America, why Richard Alsop IV, holder of immense wealth, was unable or not interested in securing the services of one of the more celebrated practitioners of the period remains a mystery. A suggestion that the pair had family connections with the Alsops has been discounted.²⁶ The prominence of the commission and Alsop's close friendship with Samuel Wadsworth Russell likely led to the traditional misattribution of the design to Ithiel Town. The Town-designed Russell House (NHL, 2001), a *tour de force* of Greek Revival architecture, had risen in Middletown less than a decade earlier. Interestingly, even after the relationship with Platt & Benne was discovered in the Alsop-Russell correspondence, scholars initially assumed that their involvement was limited to the writing of the specifications; however, a closer reading of the

²² The Alsop family business history is drawn from Joseph G. Lombardo, "Richard Alsop IV: An Early-19th-Century Yankee Entrepreneur," student paper, Wesleyan University, 1986, Alsop House files, SCAOL.

²³ See Alain Munkittrick, "Richard Alsop IV House (1838-1840): "Chronology for Architect and Decorator Attributions," DACL, which confirms and expands on his earlier research for Smith Edwards Architects, "The Feasibility Study for the Alsop House" (September 1979, DACL) and includes additional information about the architects' later careers. Platt & Benne seem to have split the partnership around the time the house was completed, if not before. By 1839, Benne had moved to Washington, D.C. where he found work as a draftsman for the U.S. Patent Office and later with Robert Mills on the construction of the U.S. Post Office Building. Platt remained in New Haven where after 1845 he was listed in city directories as a "joiner." Roger Hale Newton was the first scholar to make a Town attribution based on stylistic evidence. He pointed out the likeness of the Alsop House to the massing and plan of Town's own villa in New Haven, designed in 1836, and also claimed that the murals in both houses were by the same hand. Town's villa no longer survives. See Roger Hale Newton, *Town & Davis Architects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942).

²⁴ Smith Edwards Associates; Munkittrick, both DACL.

²⁵ "S. M. Stone" and "Platt and Benne of New Haven" were thanked by the Washington National Monument Society "for their fine designs submitted by them respectively," ambiguous wording which does not make clear if more than one plan was submitted. See citation in Munkittrick.

²⁶ Even though Beaches intermarried with later generations of Alsops, there appears to be no family connection at the time of the commission.

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documents eventually confirmed that they had indeed produced the original plans, outlined the specifications, and provided requested revisions to the design.²⁷ Alsop met with Platt in his New Haven office to review the initial plan, but because he lived in Philadelphia, his friend Samuel W. Russell acted as his agent when the project went out to bid and Alsop's nephew, Francis E. Oliver, oversaw construction with Russell.

Alsop put the project on hold in October 1836 after the two bids for the project came in at nearly double the original \$15,000 estimate. Various ways to control costs were considered; most notable and relevant to its present national significance was the substitution of trompe l'oeil painting for the desired exterior marble decoration—frieze, niche statues, and urns—called for in the original plan, at a savings of \$4,600. During this pause in the project, it appears that Alsop also consulted with renowned nineteenth-century American architect, William Strickland, about the design of the stairhall.²⁸ Contracts were finally executed in 1838 for a completion date of June 1, 1839, with Middletown builders Barzillai Sage, after his unsuccessful first bid, winning the bid for the masonry at \$5,700, and Isaac Baldwin for the carpentry at \$7,950. Revisions to the plans that increased the height and width of the main block and the depth of the wings delayed completion and added to the cost, as did the use of brownstone on the veranda. The house was finally completed by December 15, 1839, at a cost \$16,826, with an additional \$2,518 for the barn/carriage house and privy, large sums for the period, but a trifling expense for Richard Alsop.

The Artistry of the Alsop House

Completed between 1839 and ca. 1860, the exterior and interior frescoes at the Alsop House have been uniformly celebrated—and their national significance firmly established—because of their extensiveness, superb artistic effect and application, and the extreme rarity of their survival. Because of an idiosyncratic, compositional character blending pared-down Greco-Roman and Regency forms and details, the Alsop House stands architecturally apart from most other contemporary suburban villas and, to a certain extent, defies easy categorization. Perhaps because of this, discussion of the house's architectural character generally focuses as much on the wall paintings as its tectonics. In his benchmark study *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (1944), Talbot Hamlin observed: “the grisaille statues in niches and the decorative painted frieze...enhance...its otherwise severely simple walls,” and “its interior color decoration is famous.”²⁹ A decade later, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, noted: “[the Alsop House] is a symmetrical Grecian villa almost worthy of Schinkel's Potsdam, with very fine murals on the exterior as well as inside.”³⁰

The importance of the Alsop House frescoes was documented early in the academic study of American art, and continues to be admired as among the most important antebellum, domestic interiors surviving in the United

²⁷ This assumption was initially lodged by Glenn Guildford in his 1949 honors thesis for Wesleyan. Guildford was the first known researcher to consult the Alsop family papers at Yale University about the house, and his thesis is an otherwise remarkably thorough and accurate summary of the architectural history of the property up to that time. Guildford, who is credited with the discovery of the names of the builders (Sage & Baldwin), rejected Platt & Benne as “a second-rate construction firm,” incorrectly concluding that Ithiel Town designed the house with the assistance of Francis E. Oliver. See Glenn Guildford, “The Alsop House,” honors thesis (Wesleyan University, 1949), SCAOL.

²⁸ Robert Russell, “The Alsop House, Middletown, Connecticut,” draft section of his book manuscript on William Strickland provided to Wesleyan University; Clare Rogan to James A. Jacobs, e-mail message, 4 January 2008, copy in the Alsop House file, NHL. Russell expands on a suggestion made by William Ross McNabb in his master's thesis entitled “Another Look at William Strickland” (Vanderbilt University, 1971), which focuses on the close affinity between the Alsop House main stair and a known Strickland drawing (elevation and plan). The connection between Alsop and Strickland is a close one as Alsop's Philadelphia office was in Strickland's recently-completed Merchants' Exchange.

²⁹ Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America*, 176.

³⁰ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 88.

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States. Edward B. Allen was the first art historian to place their significance within the broader historical context of American decorative arts, noting in 1926: “their superior execution, classical inspiration, fine rich color, and excellent drawing and decorative quality.”³¹ Two decades later, Allyn Cox, a New York artist hired to conserve some of the wall paintings in 1949, commented, “the Alsop House...has always been alone among old New England places for its finished and elegant mural paintings, inside and out.”³² In 1966, art historian Samuel Green drew attention to the significant scope of the painting, calling it “the most elaborate program of decoration in American domestic architecture before the Civil War.”³³ In 1980, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York selected the painted stone walls and other painted elements of the Alsop House stairhall for reproduction in a new American Wing gallery. The decision was retrospectively explained in this manner: “[they are] the most remarkable of their type and the perfect complement for the furniture and objects on display.”³⁴ More recently, Peter M. Kenny, the Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, commented on the wall paintings: “these unique and irreplaceable treasures are truly part of our national cultural patrimony.”³⁵ As completed, the Alsop House frescoes comprised a notably extensive, while not entirely cohesive, program of decoration. Even more significantly, their unique survival provides a window onto a once-flourishing decorative approach and design aesthetic that has largely disappeared in the United States.

While there is some evidence that the Alsop House dazzled contemporary Middletown society, neoclassical fresco painting, derived from Roman antiquity as well as the Italian Renaissance, had become a customary mode of interior decoration for the *haute monde* in major urban centers during the first half of the nineteenth century. As Allen recognized early-on, it was essentially a late flowering of the earlier Empire style created by Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre F. L. Fontaine (1762-1853), architects for Napoleon I.³⁶ Numerous examples once existed in cities such as New York and Philadelphia where immigrant artists were well-established by the early nineteenth century; sometime later, artists even found their way to smaller communities like Middletown. Inherently fragile and subject to the ravages of time, few frescoes have survived from this period. Tastes changed, especially in the late-Victorian period, and many frescoes were painted over or covered with wallpaper, as in the morning and dining rooms of the Alsop House.³⁷

The Historical Sources of Antebellum Wall Painting

The painted decoration of the Alsop House was a modern revival of an artistic continuum dating back to antiquity. The “Pompeian” or “Empire” style of the nineteenth century was ultimately derived from Roman fresco painting as it evolved from about 100 BCE through the early-Christian era. Although the largest concentrations of antique wall paintings have been uncovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum, examples also survive in the Roman countryside. The chronological divisions once assigned to Roman painting have been found to actually overlap and are no longer considered absolutely valid, yet they are still useful in expressing some of the significant changes in artistic intention from the early, architectonic decoration to more complex trompe l’oeil illusion developed later.³⁸ By the time of Pompeii’s destruction in 79 CE, the mature genre

³¹ All quotations and information about this publication drawn from: Allen, *Early American Wall Paintings*, 101-110.

³² Cox, “Wall Paintings of the Alsop House,” 174.

³³ Green, *American Art*, 193.

³⁴ Kenny, open letter, 17 June 2004.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Allen, “Alsop House,” 101-102.

³⁷ The Alsop frescoes, properly laid down on glue size, were undamaged. That was not the case in the Austin F. Williams House in Farmington, Connecticut (NHL, 1998), in which two rooms were decorated in a similar manner. The wall panel paintings in the living room were almost destroyed when the wallpaper was removed.

³⁸ Nancy H. Ramage and Andrew Ramage, *Roman Art: Romulus to Constantine* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 9.

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encompassed a full repertory of figurative and decorative subjects and themes, as well as fairly standardized stylistic conventions. The rediscovery and subsequent archeological exploration of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century revealed polychrome decoration that influenced interior design on both sides of the Atlantic for the next century.

Working from published engravings of Pompeian wall painting, as well as examples executed in the Renaissance, early-nineteenth-century artists were free to reproduce and combine elements in various ways to suit individual spaces or the tastes of the client. As evident in the decoration of the Alsop House, painters often employed stylistic conventions from the later Roman period to enhance and delineate architectural intent. Wall compositions included fewer elements, often set-off by neutral grounds. For example, motifs such as the stylized tripods and dancing girls in the Alsop parlors appear to float in space within separate panels. While the tripods were a typical Roman motif, the dancing girls were inspired by the work of Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio; 1483-1520), considered to be one of the most gifted and influential architects and artists of the Italian Renaissance. Allyn Cox, the mural painter hired to restore the exterior frescoes, identified the source of the Alsop dancing girls as *The Hours of Raphael*, “a set of engravings very popular in Victorian homes.”³⁹ Those engravings “in turn come from a Vatican ceiling, since destroyed, but engraved by [Giovanni Battista] Piranesi [1720-1778].”⁴⁰ By the time of the painting of the Alsop House, decorative artists possessed myriad sources—ancient, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century—from which to derive subject matter and approaches for artistic organization and representation in devising the interior painting programs.

The Wall Painting Program at the Alsop House

While realized within a generation of the completion of the Alsop House and historically considered as a group, the frescoes resulted from at least two different decorating campaigns. Generally referred to as “frescoes,” it should be noted that the Alsop House wall painting is not “true” fresco, a process in which water-based pigments are applied to wet plaster. The Alsop paintings were mostly executed in thinly-bound oil paints, although a water-soluble distemper was used for the Greek key frieze in the south parlor and the ceiling designs. The exterior and the double parlors contain wall paintings dated with confidence to the time of the house’s completion in 1839 or shortly thereafter. Although possibly contemporary, the decoration in the entrance vestibule, morning room, and dining room is distinct enough to at least suggest that the work might either postdate the exterior and parlors or be by a different artist. The *grisaille* trompe l’oeil on the west wall of the stairhall is known to date from around 1860. Despite the varying phases, taken as a whole, Edward Allen proposed that the interior decoration of the Alsop House raised American standards to a new level of elegance by the infusion of a distinctly European neoclassicism, a belief that continues to be held by American art scholars.

There is general consensus about the quality and significance of the Alsop frescoes, which has, over time, concentrated debate on their authorship. Executed in what Allen referred to as the “Pompeian” style, he assumed that Aimee Alsop, born in France, had been influenced by the prevalent Empire style of decoration that was in turn based on Pompeian models.⁴¹ In his judgment, the Alsop frescoes were “unrivaled by any in the country at that time except those in the National Capitol, which were executed by Constantino Brumidi.”⁴² Based upon similarities of style and subject matter, Allen suggested that Brumidi may have been the Alsop

³⁹ Cox, “The Wall Paintings of the Alsop House,” 176.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Allen, “Alsop House,” 101.

⁴² Ibid.

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painter, an attribution that is now known to be incorrect.⁴³ To account for such elegant work in a perceived cultural backwater, some historians have attributed the frescoes to an unknown itinerant immigrant who either carried his own portfolio of published engravings or had direct knowledge of European designs. Well aware of the rich wall decorations in New York and Washington, D. C., Talbot Hamlin suggested a “wandering French or Italian painter” was responsible for the Alsop paintings.⁴⁴ Allyn Cox believed that the treatment of color in the interior frescoes indicated first-hand acquaintance with Pompeii, suggesting to him an artist of Italian extraction.⁴⁵ Family tradition holds that the iconography and motifs used in the frescoes were derived from pattern books. Joseph de Koven Alsop claimed that itinerant French artists literally copied designs found in *Antiquities d’Herculaneum, gravees par F. A. David, avec leurs explications, by P. Sylvain Marecha*, the first French publication of the Roman frescoes, a six-volume set passed down in the Alsop family.⁴⁶

An 1844 letter, identifying patron Richard Alsop IV as the “rich cousin” of the mayor (Charles Alsop), records that the interior decoration was executed “by eminent artists which he [Richard] sent from Philadelphia where he resided & paid them ten dollars each a day until the work was completed.”⁴⁷ This observation coupled with the proximity of the Alsops to the work of immigrant painter Nicola Monachesi (1795-1861) backs Hamlin and Cox’s opinions about the Italian background of the artist(s).⁴⁸ Monachesi, who also worked with his son Francesco, was a portrait and decorative painter from Naples who arrived in Philadelphia in about 1832. His commissions there included many mansions as well as decorative work in most of the Roman Catholic churches, including two in the Alsops’ Society Hill neighborhood, St. Mary’s and St. Joseph’s. Aimee Alsop, a practicing Catholic, was undoubtedly familiar with these church interiors. Her husband would have also had first-hand knowledge of Monachesi’s talents because Richard Alsop’s office was in William Strickland’s Merchants’ Exchange (1831-34), which Monachesi had decorated with figurative and allegorical paintings. At the moment, Monachesi is as plausible a candidate as any for the earliest painting at the Alsop House.

The exterior *grisaille* trompe l’oeil panels were contemporary with the building of the house and, although fashionable for the period, are thought to be part of cost-cutting decisions made before construction began that eliminated marble exterior decoration.⁴⁹ On the first-floor, tall panels depict Victory (south wing), Erato (center facade), and Juno (north wing); one second-floor panel in each of the wings contains matched trompe l’oeil urns. A painted frieze featuring swags extends around the tall center block just under the wide, bracketed eaves. The source for the figure of Erato is from the Vatican, widely known at the time from engravings.⁵⁰

On the interior, the painting of at least the parlors also dates from the time of the house’s construction. A letter of December 15, 1839, described a party Maria Dana held in her new house and took note of the interior decoration, stating: “Mrs[.] Richard Alsop [Dana’s daughter-in-law] has been in town for a few days, she was quite delighted with the house, and the paintings far exceeded her expectations...she saw nothing in Europe that

⁴³ Brumidi did not arrive in the United States until 1852, a decade after the Alsop frescoes were painted. Green, “Wesleyan’s New Art Center,” 220.

⁴⁴ Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America*, 176.

⁴⁵ Cox, “Wall Paintings of the Alsop House,” 176.

⁴⁶ Joseph Alsop to Samuel M. Green, 31 August 1948, Alsop House files, DACL.

⁴⁷ Martha Mortimer Starr to Philip Mortimer, 14 February 1844, Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown, Connecticut.

⁴⁸ The Philadelphia buildings decorated by these artists, their biographies, and possible association with Richard and Aimee Alsop were researched by Alain Munkittrick in “Chronology...”

⁴⁹ Allyn Cox observed that this decision had to be made prior to the building of the walls because they were much too thin to accept deep statuary niches. Cox, “Wall Paintings of the Alsop House,” 175.

⁵⁰ Edmiston, “Davison Art Center and Alsop House,” 2.

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surpassed them.”⁵¹ The wall panels feature dancing girls and overmantel panels with garlanded tripods and cupids in the classical manner. The ceilings contain large framed roundels within double squares. Surrounded by semicircular festoons, they depict the “Chariot of Apollo” in the north room and the “Car of Jupiter” in the south. A geometric border, decorated with flowers, birds, insects, and winged victories, framed the ceiling fields. The use of a center panel illustrating mythological or historical themes surrounded by an actual or illusionary frame and decorative delineation at the point where the ceiling meets the wall are both also representative of late-Roman painting. The ceilings in Schinkel’s *Koniglick Schloss* use similar roundels to those at the Alsop House, which led both Hitchcock and Benjamin Knotts of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to concur on the Germanic origin of the Alsop frescoes, yet it is more likely that they were produced by the same artists who painted the walls, in this case Monachesi.⁵² The total painted effect in the Alsop parlors was memorable to contemporaries. The same 1844 letter noting that the artist(s) was sent from Philadelphia also records the only period description of the interiors.

...[at] a splended [*sic*] palace in Middletown the walls & ceiling’s [*sic*] are of plaster of paris beautifully ornamented with paintings exquisitely executed...it consisted of flowers, birds, fruit, so natural as to deceive the eye, together with all the celebrated personages of the Heathen Mythology, with their attendant Cupid’s [*sic*] painted in water-colours. When painting the ceilings there were scaffolds erected on which the artist’s [*sic*] were obliged to lay flat on their backs.⁵³

The dates and artists for the entrance vestibule, dining room, and morning room remain subject to some debate, but they are believed to either be contemporary with or only a bit later than the exterior and parlors. Allyn Cox stylistically linked some of the spaces in this manner: “the two parlors, parts of the morning room, and the dining room frieze are in an early nineteenth-century version of the ‘Pompeian’ style” and “the style of the painting everywhere except in the stair hall is linear and ornamental; a liquid medium draws rather than models the forms, quite in the tradition of the eighteenth century. The color is bright and clear, with an outdoor effect of diffused illumination. All details are sharp and architectural.”⁵⁴ Of the individual rooms, more definitive artistic consideration of the dining room is difficult as the space was once smaller and most of the original painting has been papered-over; the frieze on the west wall is thought to be original and was replicated on the other three walls during a mid-twentieth-century restoration.⁵⁵ Although neither as extensive nor elaborate as the morning room, a small mural in the entrance vestibule is similar in concept, depicting a vista through a marble colonnade with a flower pot on the sill as the only spot of color.

With the possible exception of the dancing girl panel on the chimney breast, which bears similarity to motifs in the parlors, the trompe l’oeil murals in the morning room are the most distinct of the early group. Edward Allen’s assessment held that the same artists could have executed the morning room murals and the one in the entrance vestibule, which for him were vivid reminders of the trompe l’oeil landscapes of Pompeii; however, they are so stylistically discrete that this conclusion seems unfounded. Although the design is entirely appropriate for the setting, there is a flatter, linear style in which little attempt is made to create either modeling or perspective, and a more intense, less nuanced color scheme. Arched openings with wickerwork lattice are

⁵¹ Louisa Mather Mansfield to Joseph K. F. Mansfield, Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown, Connecticut. See also a letter of 22 January 1839, between same correspondents.

⁵² Guildford, “The Alsop House,” 55-56.

⁵³ Starr to Mortimer, 14 February 1844.

⁵⁴ Cox, “Wall Paintings of the Alsop House,” 175.

⁵⁵ Edmiston, “Davison Art Center and Alsop House,” 4.

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painted on three walls to give the illusion of windows with the sky beyond. Utilizing a richer, brighter color scheme than the parlor frescoes, they are decorated with vines, and other flora and fauna painted in a naturalistic manner. The birds, which include a macaw and a Louisiana tanager, are highly detailed, accurate representations said to be exact copies of engravings in Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1808-1814), the first book on native American species.⁵⁶ On the ceiling, a large square center panel with a floral medallion is flanked by narrow filigree panels. Larger panels with latticework borders at either end are simplified versions of the wall murals.

Completed around 1860, the *grisaille* trompe l'oeil in the stairhall, primarily architectonic in character, is more representative of mid-nineteenth-century wall painting than the examples elsewhere in the house that are more rooted in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century neoclassicism. The form and execution of the stairhall painting so typifies the decoration of the age that the Metropolitan Museum of Art reproduced components in an American Wing gallery dedicated to the decorative arts of the period. The large expanse of the west wall is painted to resemble marble masonry with a sculptured frieze and cornice. The swag in the frieze is detailed with urns and angels; the six-foot niches contain representations of statues in the style of Antonio Canova (1757-1822), an Italian neoclassical sculptor.

Unlike the other wall painting in the Alsop House, these frescoes have been definitively attributed to a particular artist, William Borgelt (1824-1884).⁵⁷ Born in Hanover, Germany, Borgelt emigrated to New York about 1850 and came to Middletown about 1854. First employed as a sign painter by Asa Stow, he soon went into business for himself as a "fresco and decorative painter" and developed a regional reputation. Although as-yet-undocumented, stylistic comparison suggests that the Samuel Russell House was another one of his prestigious domestic commissions. Like Monachesi, Borgelt also did church interiors, including the decoration of St. John's in Middletown, which Aimee Alsop endowed during her lifetime, and St. Mary's across the river in Portland. Borgelt's son, William Frederic (1853-1929), carried on his father's business from 1884 to 1929.

Summary

The decorative wall painting in the Alsop House is nationally significant whether considering its extent and execution, or the rarity of its survival. Created in two or more campaigns between 1839 and ca. 1860 by skilled European artist-émigrés, the overall program features the expected but also the more novel motifs, representations, and structures based directly on and in the spirit of ancient, Renaissance, and neoclassical models. The importance of the wall painting to the history of American decorative arts and the nation's cultural heritage has long been acknowledged by scholars, and the house's present owner, Wesleyan University, remains committed to their continued stewardship and care for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

⁵⁶ Alexander Wilson, *American Ornithology, or The Natural History of Birds of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1808-1814).

⁵⁷ The attribution was confirmed in 1894 by his daughter, Mrs. George Burnham. See: letter from Lois Barton Williams, who boarded in the Borgelt home, to Wesleyan University, 1952, Alsop House files, SCAOL.

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Smith Edwards Architects. "Feasibility Study for the Alsop House: Phase I Restoration-Research." Davison Art Center Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. September 1979.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ___ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
[X] Previously Listed in the National Register: NR # 70000686, 10/06/1970
___ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
___ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
[X] Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: HABS No. CT-3-4 (1934, 1937)
___ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record:

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State Agency
[X] Federal Agency
___ Local Government
[X] University
___ Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 2 acres

Table with 4 columns: UTM References, Zone, Easting, Northing. Values: 18, 695440, 4603160

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundaries of the nominated property are shown on the attached site plan drawn to scale.

Boundary Justification: The boundaries encompass the historic parcel purchased by Richard Alsop IV in 1835, and take in the two domestic buildings originally constructed in 1839. The boundaries follow the iron fence along the High Street frontage and the surveyed property lines on the north and south. The rear boundary shown on the site plan is an arbitrary line drawn to set off the house lot from the grounds of Wesleyan University's Center for the Arts.

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DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
January 16, 2009