

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

JAMES MERRILL 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: Merrill, James House

Other Name/Site Number: Burtch Block

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 107 Water Street

Not for publication:

City/Town: Stonington

Vicinity:

State: CT

County: New London

Code: 011

Zip Code: 06378

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

0

0

0

1

Noncontributing

0 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

0 Total

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

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ 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
Commercial/Trade
Social

Sub: Single dwelling
Sub: Specialty Store
Sub: Meeting Hall

Current: Domestic
Commercial/Trade

Sub: Multiple Dwelling
Sub: Specialty Store

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late Victorian: Victorian Eclectic

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Stone: Granite
Walls: Wood: Shingle
Roof: Asphalt
Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**Summary**

The James Merrill House is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 2 for its association with the poet James Ingram Merrill. Merrill is considered by critics and readers to be among the most significant American writers of the second half of the twentieth century, and as such, meets the requirements of NHL Criterion Exception 8. As a poet, he valued, cultivated and renewed poetry's traditional practices, and at the same time was boldly experimental. He himself described his poems as "chronicles of love and loss," and his poems delve into the extremes of rapture and despair, into the comedy of domestic life, the allure of foreign landscapes, and the sublime reaches of occult experience. His work addressed the crucial topics of modern life, and often touched on the complexities and joy of homosexuality. His career was long and prolific; during his lifetime he published thirteen collections of poems, as well as novels and plays, prose and a memoir. After his death, his collected work was gathered into four hefty definitive volumes, and an edition of his letters is forthcoming. His masterwork, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, is a long epic poem drawing on occult practices and has often been cited as one of the most astonishing poems ever written. Merrill won every major award for poetry given in the United States: the Pulitzer Prize (1977), two National Book Awards (1967, 1979), the Bollingen Prize (1973), the National Book Critics Circle Award (1983), and the Library of Congress's Bobbitt National Poetry Prize (1990). In the American tradition of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson, he wrote with subtlety and sympathy of homosexual life, illuminating its anxieties and fulfillments. His work is studied in universities as an example of poetry at its most ambitious and brilliant, but his work and life are also now being recognized and understood as important concerns for the expanding queer and gender studies in academia.

Location and Context

The 1901 James Merrill House is a late-Victorian, mixed commercial and residential building with residences on the second and third floor, and a shop on the first floor. The house is located on Water Street in Stonington Borough, a picturesque maritime village set on a narrow, 170-acre peninsula in the southeastern corner of Connecticut near the Rhode Island border. The eclectically-styled, shingle-clad building originally contained street-level retail space, second-floor clubrooms, and third-floor living quarters. In 1956, the property was purchased by noted American poet Merrill and his partner David Jackson who used the third floor as their private living and guest space. Adding an attic studio and rooftop deck, the men transformed their quarters with a distinctively quirky decor that remains largely intact. The building is currently owned by the Stonington Village Improvement Association (SVIA), which inherited the building from Merrill in 1995. The SVIA leases out the ground-floor retail space and two one-bedroom apartments (on the north and south ends) that occupy the former clubrooms. The entire third floor and attic studio are reserved for use by visiting scholars as part of the James Merrill Writers-in-Residence program. The SVIA also opens the Merrill apartment to the public throughout the year. The property is in good condition and has undergone relatively few alterations since its construction.

Stonington Borough is one of multiple villages, including Lords Point, Pawcatuck, Wequetequock, and the eastern portions of Mystic and Old Mystic that comprise the fifty-square mile township of Stonington. Although this enclave of leafy streets lies only three miles south of Interstate 95 and just below the east/west rail tracks of the Amtrak Northeast Corridor line, a single viaduct passing over the tracks provides the only access by land. To the west is Stonington Harbor, and Fishers Island Sound lies to the east and south. Narrow lands and right-of-ways offer sightlines to the water in all three directions, and the view west provides one of the few over-saltwater sunset vistas on the East Coast. Physically separated from the surrounding area, the

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borough looks and feels a world apart, owing not only to geography but also to the streetscape's intimate scale and an impressive archive of historic maritime structures. Building materials in a traditional New England vernacular of clapboard and weathered-shingle also contribute to the distinct ambience of the New England seacoast.

Running near the harbor side of the peninsula, Water Street is one of two primary north-south thoroughfares that travel the length of the peninsula, establishing parallel vertical axes for a grid of about a dozen shorter horizontal streets. The James Merrill House occupies the south half of its block at the northeast corner of Union Street. The building stands cheek-by-jowl with a pair of two-and-one-half-story, wood-frame storefront buildings to the north on Water Street and a diminutive Greek Revival-style, gable-front dwelling to its east, on Union Street. Next to that small house is the former First Baptist Church of Stonington, a sprawling Colonial Revival building with a shingled tower, which was designed in 1889 by the noted New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White.

Exterior Description:

Prominent on its corner site, the Merrill House stands on a dressed granite foundation and is crowned by a shingled-mansard roof anchored by an overhanging cornice set over a paneled-fascia trimmed with a dentil course. The building is of wood-frame construction with a tripartite arrangement of siding materials intended to delineate its three primary stories: clapboard on the first and third floors, alternating with imbricated shingles at the second story. Another pattern, zigzag novelty shingles, distinguishes the cantilevered semi-circular tower that anchors the building's southwest corner.

Both the long west facade (Water Street) and the shorter south elevation (Union Street) feature an assortment of oriels, bays, and other projections in a lively composition typical of Victorian-era building design. Fenestration at street level consists of the building's original plate-glass display windows. The upper stories display an asymmetrical arrangement of double-hung sash windows (wood frames with one-over-one glazing) with molded lintels, set singly and in pairs. Shallow pedimented dormers appear at the third story, and a low, flat-roofed addition is barely visible on the rooftop. The bulk of the building is painted gray, with the molded window frames on the top stories accented in cream. The first-story window trim and the lower level of the Union Street elevation are painted white.

The principal elevation on Water Street incorporates two prominent street entries, each approached by a pair of high granite steps and crowned by a Colonial Revival entablature trimmed with a stylized swan's neck pediment. The northernmost of these doorways has a recessed, three-sided plan, accommodating angled entries to a barbershop on the north and a clothing shop on the south. An elongated fixed-light appears at center, and there is a four-pane transom above. A similar, but narrower, entry without angled sides is positioned under a three-sided oriel at the center of the facade, where it provides access to the residential floors. The door is noteworthy for its frosted-glass panel, etched with an Art Nouveau design. The first story display windows are topped by bands of multi-pane lights and shaded by canvas awnings; the southernmost of these storefronts forms a shallow three-sided bay with a flaring roof.

To its right, the cast-iron base of the corner tower forms a marquee-like hood, rimmed with light bulbs for the building's corner entry; this serves the largest of the three retail spaces, the longtime home of a dress and fabric shop. A domed, semi-circular bay window, set above a narrow basement light well, appears just to the east. An exterior wooden staircase rises at the north end of the building, where a narrow three-story bump-out housing an elevator is also located.¹

¹ Adapted from Rachel D. Carley, "James Merrill House," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Stonington,

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Interior Description:

The entire ground floor of the James Merrill House is devoted to its three commercial spaces, each of which preserves a high, coved ceiling of pressed tin, ornamented with recessed panels, elaborate moldings, and medallions. A heavily-molded doorframe detailed with sunburst corner blocks framing the building's corner entrance is another notable feature.

Crowned by its swan's neck pediment, the residential entry on the building's west elevation opens into a small vestibule, which is lit by an Art Nouveau ceiling fixture fitted with frosted-glass shades. Hinged doors open to a narrow hall dominated by a steep staircase with a molded handrail and a turned-and-beveled newel topped by an onion-shaped finial. Plaster hallway walls on all three levels are finished with varnished headboard wainscoting. The two loft-like apartments (with ceilings about twelve feet high) on the second story maintain the open feeling of the original clubrooms, along with their varnished wood floors, ornate pressed-tin ceilings, a marble sink, pocket doors, and the half-moon stage that occupies the south apartment's corner tower. A few unobtrusive partitions have been added to section off kitchens and baths.

The third floor spaces are also in an excellent state of preservation. The north end of the floor contains what was once Merrill's and Jackson's guest quarters. That apartment consists of a central library area with a bedroom, kitchen, and bath on the east side and a sitting room in the northwest corner. The remainder of the third floor is devoted to the men's own residence. Here, a bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom open off a narrow hall on the east side of the building, while the remaining living spaces open onto Water Street, with windows facing west to the harbor. The southwest corner dining room is particularly striking, not only for its semi-circular plan—prescribed by its tower location—but also for its domed tin ceiling, embossed with an exuberant, classically inspired composition of swags, wreaths, and fleurs-de-lys. The ceiling pattern extends eastward with an equally ornate grid divided by beaded ribs. A central sitting room opens northward to a telephone room walled with bookcases and floored with a tile mosaic in a graphic pattern of brown, black, and white. A central section of bookshelves mounted on hinges functions as a “secret” door to the apartment's northernmost room. Fashioned as a snug study, this space is fitted with still more bookcases and a built-in daybed.

A narrow stair ascends from the east side of the telephone room to the attic level, where Merrill and Jackson raised a portion of the roof to create space for a studio and music room, tucked under exposed rafters. A concrete *chiminea* equipped with a freestanding metal flue stands on the west side of the room, and a built-in bar sink is located opposite. A black-and-white vinyl checkerboard covers the floor. On the south of the studio, sliding glass doors open to a rooftop deck, which offers a panorama of the neighboring McKim, Mead & White church building, village rooftops, and the harbor and Fishers Island Sound beyond.

The rooms in both apartments gain particular spatial interest from their inwardly angled walls and unusually shallow, canted dormers, dictated by the contours of the building's double-pitched, mansard roof. The spaces are further distinguished by their well-preserved 1901 architectural details, including stained-glass window panels and transoms, bulls-eye corner blocks, and embossed brass lock plates and porcelain doorknobs.

Of all the interior spaces, the Merrill apartment is the most distinctive, due mainly to Merrill's and Jackson's arresting decor, an essential contributing feature to the space's character and significance. The effect depends primarily on a fearless combination of pattern and saturated paint hues: citrus green (floor) and sky blue (walls)

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for the bedroom; turquoise for the bookshelves; a Mondrian-like² scheme of orange, white, and aqua for the kitchen cabinets; and a startling persimmon for the dining room, where the pressed tin ceiling design is picked out in white and gold. The sitting room's silk-screened wallpaper, created specifically for Merrill in 1974 by Hubbell Pierce, features a graphic design of stylized clouds, fans, and demonic-looking bats with iridescent eyes, all printed in varying shades of chartreuse against an indigo background.

Although intimate in size, the light-filled rooms convey a cozy openness, thanks to freestanding bookcases and large pieces, such as the sitting room's Venetian pier glass, which help to deframe spaces without entirely enclosing them. On the walls are numerous original artworks in a variety of mediums, including Japanese prints, and works by Grace Hartigan, Larry Rivers, David McIntosh, Nicholas Tomasi, and others, along with sketches by David Jackson. The furniture is a fanciful mix of pieces ranging from brightly-painted wicker to significant antiques. A collection of talismans and curiosities arranged on windowsills and tables just as Merrill left them plays a calculated part in the overall effect.³

Integrity

The building and its 1901 detailing are remarkably intact. Striped bathroom tiles (green and pink on the Merrill side and green and blue in the guest quarters) are distinctive period pieces, likely dating from the 1950s renovations. The rooftop studio, commissioned by Merrill and Jackson and designed by Scholfield, Lindsay and Liebig, a New London architectural firm, dates from 1956. The exterior stair was added in the 1970s and the elevator was installed about a decade earlier. Some of the wooden window sash has been replaced. Overall, the building retains a high degree of historic and architectural integrity to the period of significance.

Merrill's house is currently entrusted to the Stonington Village Improvement Association in Stonington and is used to further modern poetry in America. Every year several poets reside in the complex with stays ranging from one week up to a few months. During their residency, the house becomes a working space for writing poetry and critiques. Recently, Kay Ryan, the sixteenth Poet Laureate of the United States, took residence in Merrill's home.⁴

² Pieter Cornelis Mondrain was a Dutch painter best known for creating works of art that had grids of primary colors on a white canvas separated by black grid lines.

³ Carley, "James Merrill House" NRHP Form.

⁴ "James Merrill: Museum and Writers-In Residence Program," last modified 2014, accessed July 19, 2014, http://www.jamesmerrillhouse.org/writers_in_residence.htm.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
 Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A B X C D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A B C D E F G X

NHL Criteria: 2

NHL Criteria Exceptions: 8

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
3. LiteratureAreas of Significance: Literature
Social History

Period(s) of Significance: 1956-1995

Significant Dates: 1962 and 1976

Significant Person(s): James Merrill

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Unknown (architect)
Francis D. Burtch (builder)
Scholfield, Lindsay, Liebig (roof addition)Historic Contexts: XIX Literature
XXXI. Social and Humanitarian Movements

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

The James Merrill House is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 2 for its association with the poet James Ingram Merrill. Merrill is considered by critics and readers to be among the most significant American writers of the second half of the twentieth century, and as such, meets the requirements of NHL Criterion Exception 8. As a poet, he valued, cultivated and renewed poetry's traditional practices, and at the same time was boldly experimental. He himself described his poems as "chronicles of love and loss," and his poems delve into the extremes of rapture and despair, into the comedy of domestic life, the allure of foreign landscapes, and the sublime reaches of occult experience. His work addressed the crucial topics of modern life, and often touched on the complexities and joy of homosexuality. His career was long and prolific; during his lifetime he published thirteen collections of poems, as well as novels and plays, prose and a memoir. After his death, his collected work was gathered into four hefty definitive volumes, and an edition of his letters is forthcoming. His masterwork, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, is a long epic poem drawing on occult practices and has often been cited as one of the most astonishing poems ever written. Merrill won every major award for poetry given in the United States: the Pulitzer Prize (1977), two National Book Awards (1967, 1979), the Bollingen Prize (1973), the National Book Critics Circle Award (1983), and the Library of Congress's Bobbitt National Poetry Prize (1990). In the American tradition of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson, he wrote with subtlety and sympathy of homosexual life, illuminating its anxieties and fulfillments. His work is studied in universities as an example of poetry at its most ambitious and brilliant, but his work and life are also now being recognized and understood as important concerns for the expanding queer and gender studies in academia.

During a period when most of America was breaking from the strict formalist poetry of previous centuries, Merrill held fast to this style. Over time, he introduced more radical material into his poetry, including well-crafted examination about homosexuality, art, and spiritualism, though he shied away from writing about political events.⁵ Throughout his career, Merrill excelled as a writer and continued a tradition of poetry abandoned by many poets during the mid-twentieth century.

In the opening pages of his pinnacle work, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, James Merrill describes the importance of his home at 107 Water Street in composing this poetry. He writes, "Backdrop: The dining room at Stonington/ Wall of ready-mixed matte "flame" (a witty/ Shade, now watermelon, now sunburn)./Overhead, a turn of the century dome/Expressing white tin wreaths and fleur-de-lys/In a palpable relief to candlelight."⁶ This house played a monumental role in the development of Merrill's work, and it is where he composed his award-winning poetry for almost forty years. Starting in the summer of 1955, their second summer at 107 Water Street when the couple was still renting the home,⁷ Merrill and his partner David Jackson ventured into the practice of the occult with at-home séances that culminated in the three part, voluminous, 560 plus pages of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, for which Merrill was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Awards and The National Book Award for Poetry.⁸ For over thirty years, Merrill and his partner spent hundreds, possibly

⁵ A notable exception to this is his poem *18th West 11th Street* about the bombing of his childhood home by the Underground Weatherman in 1972.

⁶ James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 5

⁷ The couple first rented the home in the summer of 1954-1955 and became so attached to the property that in 1956 they bought the house, using the third floor space as their living quarters, renting out the lower levels for commercial and residential occupancy.

⁸ Merrill, *Changing Light at Sandover*, 5. Note also that Merrill won the National Book Award twice: first in 1967 for his work *Nights and Days* and again in 1979 for *Mirabell: Books of Number*. *Mirabell* is the first of the three volumes in *The Changing Light at Sandover* and was published before the rest of the epic. Critics have praised the entire work, but according to John Greening, most

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thousands of evenings interacting with spirits and their own subconscious via the Ouija board. The couple's use of the occult tradition led to the creation of Merrill's largest and most well-received work.

Merrill's continued success can be attributed to his maturing style as he aged, as well as his venture into spiritual influences for some of his later poetry.⁹ Merrill drew extensively on his personal life for his works, much of it written in the first-person voice, and hence autobiographical. He was a formalist poet who relied heavily on meter and rhyme, and style, sometimes semi-confessional poetry. His later works were strongly influenced by the occult tradition and informed by other poets such as W. B. Yeats and William Blake. Merrill's sometimes subtle, and later often explicit, references to his homosexual experience was a defining feature of his works. These attributes solidify James Merrill's importance as a poet during his lifetime and his continued relevance to American literary traditions as critics take a deeper look into his work, not just for its occultism and form, but also for its use of homosexual imagery.

The period of significance for the property begins in 1954, the year that Merrill and his partner David Jackson moved into the home, and ends with his death in 1995. It was at this home that Merrill wrote his award-winning works. The house is eligible under NHL Criterion Exception 8 because his later works, particularly those dealing more openly with his homosexuality, were written with the last fifty years. Widely considered to be one of the great poets of his generation, Merrill meets the program's threshold of exceptional significance.

Biography

James Merrill was born on March 3, 1926, to Helen Ingram Merrill and Charles Merrill. His father was the co-founder of the investment company Merrill-Lynch and the family resided at 18 West 11th Street in New York City.¹⁰ Merrill spent the first several years of his life in that house. His two stepsiblings from his father's previous marriage---Doris, his sister, and Charles, his brother---were several years older. His parents raised him in Manhattan and Southampton, surrounded by wealth and privilege.

Merrill's education increased his interest in poetry and literature. An adored governess inspired his interest in German and French when he was very young. Merrill continued his education at St. Bernard's, an exclusive private school in New York City, and the Lawrenceville School which he attended as a boarder. These schools further developed his musical and artistic abilities. His family also encouraged his artistic development and supported his interest in poetry. Because of this familial support, there was no expectation that James Merrill or his brother would join their father's firm. Merrill's father purportedly said that he wanted a "first-rate poet for a son rather than a third-rate stockbroker."¹¹

While at Lawrenceville, Merrill studied classic languages and literature. Though he did not fit in with the jocular, athletic boys, he did befriend Frederick Buechner, who introduced Merrill to literary classics and showed him "the way by publishing in the school literary magazines...."¹² This friendship launched Merrill's

critics agree that *Mirabell* was by far the strongest.

⁹ James Merrill, *A Different Person: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 63. As noted by his critics and stated in his memoir, Merrill wanted a small, select readership. During one of his first publications, which he personally funded, a tenth of the books of the already small collection were lost, forcing his readership to be small, perhaps even smaller than he had hoped.

¹⁰ On March 6, 1970, the Weather Underground Organization (aka the Weathermen), a radical splinter group from Students for a Democratic Society, were constructing a bomb in the basement of 18 West 11th Street when the bomb exploded prematurely. The explosion which killed three members of the Weathermen and injured two others, also destroyed the townhouse.

¹¹ Anne T. Keene, "James Merrill's Life," *Modern American Poetry*, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, accessed July 3, 2014, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/merrill/life.htm. See also *American National Biography Online*, s.v. "James Merrill," accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03331.html>.

¹² James Merrill, *A Different Person* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 13. He and Buechner, who became a successful author and a Presbyterian minister, remained friends for some years after high school.

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interest in literature. A competitive relationship with Buechner spurred him to write his first poems, which he published in the school literary magazine, *18 Lines*. When Merrill turned sixteen, his father published some of his amassed work in *Jim's Book: A Collection of Poems and Short Stories*. While still in high school Merrill looked to poets like Yeats, Pound, and Wilde for inspiration. Merrill and Buechner asked their mothers for overcoats similar to that of Oscar Wilde, demonstrating Merrill's early inclination to imitate and draw from modernist gay poets. Poets like Wilde, who was outed as gay, and other "queer" figures presented role models for many like James Merrill. Merrill recalled memorizing poems by Whitman and Wilde at a young age because they gave him comfort in his isolation, similar to the isolation felt by other poets like Hart Crane.¹³

Merrill enrolled at Amherst College in the fall of 1943. After being drafted in 1944, he served in the Army as a private for about eighteen months before returning to Amherst to graduate *summa cum laude* in 1947. Merrill served in the army infantry even though he could have avoided military duty by disclosing his homosexuality. Upon entrance into the military, medical and psychological examiners were supposed to look for "telltale" signs such as men who were "effeminate in appearance and mannerisms."¹⁴ Like many (including gay men and lesbians) in his generation, Merrill served honorably and rarely wrote or spoke of his service. Both of Merrill's parents worried that his homosexuality would affect his service. Merrill says that though he and his father only discussed his sexuality explicitly on two occasions, his father knew he was gay. The first time was after his father was recovering from a heart attack when Merrill was a youngster. The second time was before Merrill left for the army. Merrill says that his father told him to "never let a man lay his hands on me."¹⁵ Both of Merrill's parents worried that their son's sexuality would be exposed and cost him his job, education, and future.¹⁶ In post-war America, most homosexuals risked serious consequences including unemployment, imprisonment, and embarrassment if outed. Merrill and his parents were both aware that sodomy remained illegal in every state and that a homosexual life came with many obstacles. Many parents of children moving to large cities during and after WWII feared that these "deviants" could corrupt their children or debase society.¹⁷ Americans were so concerned about the possibility of delinquents, a term that came to be seen as synonymous with homosexuals, that Congress formed a committee to combat delinquents such as homosexuals.¹⁸

While at Amherst, Merrill formed close friendships and intimate sexual relationships that influenced his early work. He first published the poem "Black Swan" with the support of his English professor and lover Kimon Friar. Merrill dedicated much of his work to Kimon Friar and the first letters of each line in "Black Swan" spell out the name KIMON FRIAR.¹⁹ Friar took a paternal role in Merrill's life, guiding his growth as a poet. In particular, Friar arranged for Robert Frost to meet with Merrill and critique some of his work.²⁰ Friar also strengthened Merrill's interest in classic poets. Merrill completed his senior year by writing a thesis on Proust, the famed French novelist, and his use of metaphor.

After graduation Merrill spent some time living at home in New York City until he felt the need to explore the world free of the watchful eyes of his mother, who became increasingly concerned about her son's

¹³ Merrill, *Different Person*, 15. James also wrote and said in many interviews that he knew many of Wilde's poems by heart. Thomas Bolt, "James Merrill," *BOMB* no. 36 (Summer 1991): 42.

¹⁴ Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 20.

¹⁵ Merrill, *Different Person*, 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89. See also Timothy Materer, "Confession and Autobiography in James Merrill's Early Poetry," *Twentieth Century Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 154.

¹⁷ Adapted from Megan E. Springate, "Proposed Framework and Initial Survey Results for the National Historic Landmark LGBTQ Theme Study (draft)" (unpublished manuscript on file with the National Park Service, National Historic Landmarks Program, Washington, DC, last modified 2014).

¹⁸ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2011), 193.

¹⁹ Materer, "Confession and Autobiography," 155.

²⁰ Merrill, *Different Person*, 15. Robert Frost was a live-in poet at Amherst in the 1940s.

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homosexuality. Merrill's mother forced him to attend psychiatric sessions where the physician told him that Friar was a substitute for an absent father.²¹ Merrill also wanted to separate from New York City's rigorous social schedule, as he tended to be more of a private person. He took a couple of years to travel in Europe, mainly in Greece and Italy, before returning home. While he was abroad, his mother intercepted letters from Friar to Merrill. Disgusted by the fifteen-year age difference and frightened by the "Lavender Scare," Merrill's mother became distraught and destroyed many boxes of letters from Friar and other friends that Merrill had saved.²² This further frustrated Merrill, who wrote, "I was glad to be putting an ocean between me and my parents."²³

Merrill's time abroad matured him, and became the focus of his memoir *A Different Person*. The memoir explores in great detail Merrill's relationships with several men as he wrestled with his own identity. Merrill reconnected with many former lovers while in Europe, hoping that some of them would rekindle their previous romance, but most flatly rejected him. Those that did connect with Merrill brought him into complicated love triangles, leaving him feeling confused and lost. Increasingly depressed about these rejections, Merrill sought psychological treatment. With his psychologist, he explored feelings of disappointment, isolation, and sadness, all emotions which were considered typical of homosexuals in that generation.²⁴ Though Merrill did not write during these few years, these experiences laid the foundation for his future work.

Once he returned to the United States, Merrill began writing poetry seriously, and by the early 1950s he had met David Jackson, who would become his longtime partner. In the 1950s, Merrill and Jackson traveled and enjoyed a wide circle of literary and artistic friends. By the early 1960s, Merrill's career had taken off. He published *Water Street* in 1962, quickly followed by *The (Diblos) Notebook* in 1965. Merrill earned his first major award in 1967 for his collection *Nights and Days*. Many of these poems have homosexual undertones, but they are more grounded than Merrill's previous love poems, showing his growing range and maturity. Many of the poems also include anguish about lost lovers and internal pain caused by these relationships. Several lines capture the pain of Merrill's work: "Young storm this house is yours./ Let our eyes darken, your rain come, the candle reeling/ Deep in what reflects controls itself and me..."²⁵ His work continued to mature in the 1970s with *Braving the Elements*, *The Divine Comedies: Poems*, and *Mirabell: Books of Number*.

By the 1980s, Merrill had published his magnum opus, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, followed by a few shorter works including *Late Settings* and *The Inner Room*. *The Inner Room* was well received and is notable for its inclusion of a farewell eulogy to Merrill's friend and literary critic David Kalstone, who died of AIDS in 1986. The work marks a distinct shift in the history of the gay community as well as in Merrill's works.²⁶ This work followed Merrill's memoir, written after he contracted HIV/AIDS in the early 1990s. Many critics interpreted his final work, *The Scattering of Salts*, as a reflective culmination of his previous works. Timothy Materer, one of Merrill's most astute critics, wrote: "Taken together, the retrospective quality of them – a recurring allusion to a body of work that was part of the past, a note of summation and, in every sense, of setting – gave the volume an implication of finality that I kept refusing to take literally."²⁷

Throughout his adult life and especially at the end of his life Merrill enjoyed the freedom to travel with his friends and partner to his homes in the United States, including 107 Water Street in Stonington, a fair weather

²¹ Materer, "Confession and Autobiography," 152. See also a *Different Person*, 20. Merrill spoke of being "cured."

²² Materer, "Confession and Autobiography," 154.

²³ Merrill, *Different Person*, 4.

²⁴ For further reading see "Coming Out as Going In: The Image of the Homosexual as a Sad Young Man," 116-136, in Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁵ "Another April" in *Nights and Days*.

²⁶ Carolyn Kizer, "Necessities of Life and Death," *New York Times*, November 12, 1989.

²⁷ W. S. Merwin, "The End of More Than a Book," *New York Times*, March 26, 1995.

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home in Key West, and an apartment in New York City. He also had an apartment in Athens, having fallen in love with Greece during his first visit abroad after college. During his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1967, Merrill said that he loved being abroad because:

“The Greek I mostly speak, if I speak at all, is at once fluent to the ear and infinitely primitive: no question, even in my own mind, of overtone, allusion, irony, word play. Only the happiest accident allows me to say anything I don’t mean, and I can’t begin to tell you how refreshing that is.”²⁸

Merrill felt that his experiences with the Greek language heightened his work, and he spent several months each year in Greece until the 1980s.

In later life Merrill wrote more openly about his relationships. Over the course of his lifetime he had several intense and passionate relationships with men, mostly artists, writers, novelists, and actors. He also carried on several secondary relationships, both platonic and sexual, throughout the years, especially when he was in Greece. Merrill courted young Greek men from his 20s until he was in his late 50s.²⁹ His partner, David Jackson, stayed with him for nearly thirty years. By the late 1980s, Merrill’s partnership with Jackson had eroded due to stresses placed on the relationship, including Merrill’s success as a poet and Jackson’s failure as a writer, as well as Jackson’s increasing dementia. Despite their separation, the two men remained friends until Merrill’s death. Some of Merrill’s friends surmised that his secondary relationships were meant to supplement his diminishing sexual and emotional relationship with Jackson as they aged.³⁰ When the relationship between Jackson and Merrill failed, Merrill began courting another man, Peter Hooten, an actor who many claim was simply seeking the Merrill fortune.³¹ During this period, Merrill wrote about his many friends who had already died due to AIDS-related health issues; a few years later Merrill himself succumbed to the same fate when he died of AIDS-related heart failure in Tucson, Arizona, on February 6, 1995.

Formalism

The formalist tradition of poetry is defined by its strict use of meter, rhyme, capitalization, and punctuation. Most authors, including Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, and Dryden, adhered to formalism from classical times until the rise of modern poetry.³² Great English poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used iambic pentameter, meaning that each line had five beats and ten syllables. This tradition carried over to some of America’s first generation of great poets. The mid-nineteenth century Romantic poets such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, also used iambic pentameter. Poets who contributed to the early American canon, such as Edgar Allen Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson, used rhymes, sonnets, ballades, odes, and couplets in their poetry.

²⁸ National Book Award Acceptance Speeches, “James Merrill, Winner of the of the 1967 National Book Award in Poetry for *Nights and Days*,” last accessed July 3, 2014, http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_jmerrill.htm#.U7Vz914fxqY.

²⁹ Alison Lurie, *Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson* (New York: Viking, 2001), 154. In his memoir, Merrill also recounts excursions he and Jackson had in Greece courting different young men. Sometimes these relationships were of a sexual nature, sometimes not. Often, Merrill supported the families of the men he saw, including paying for their weddings. He even brought the family of one of his lovers to the United States. Several of his poems focus on these relationships, including *My Greek* and another one dedicated to the daughter of one of his lovers.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 145. In this memoir, Lurie paints a picture of Jackson and Merrill that explains the downfall of their relationship and shows a keen sadness about the illnesses that consumed both of these men by the end of their lives.

³² Paul Dolan, “American Poetry: The Divided Tradition,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* no. 3 (1990): 33.

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Early American poets relied heavily on the British tradition, including formalism, until they found an American voice and content for their poetry. Formalism remained the classic and only way to compose and arrange poetry until Walt Whitman, who radicalized poetry by attempting free verse within a formalist framework. Walt Whitman was arguably the first poet, American or otherwise, to change the form and content of meter. Many of Whitman's contemporaries, such as Emily Dickinson, scorned Whitman's work because they said it ruined the flow of poetry by venturing from the traditional lyrical canon.³³ With this change, Whitman paved the way for free verse writers in the twentieth century.³⁴ His work allowed poets to be "more authentic and valuable" and marked a "distinct break from the British tradition" used by the majority of American poets before him.³⁵

Every generation of poets until the middle of the nineteenth century radicalized previous forms of poetry and overthrew the old guard by changing the subjectivity and content of their work. New generations usually claimed that the poems of previous generations were too esoteric or that the content of the poems was irrelevant to the masses. Rising poets would "revolutionize" and modify content, as did the Modernists in response to the works of the Romantics. Modernist poets such as William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound transformed Romantic poetry by emphasizing intellectual statements about the world. Many of the Modernists also wanted to write about urban and everyday life rather than classical motifs and nature, which were emphasized by the Romantics.³⁶ The work of poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot depended on the free verse style pioneered by Walt Whitman, diverging further from the strict formalist structure of the Romantic poets.³⁷ Leaders of the Modernist movement said that their work was "a rebellion against an antiquated idiom..."³⁸ This generation of poets helped revolutionize art and poetry, partly as a response to the global tragedy of World War One, which provided horrific inspiration for poetry about non-romantic "everyday" topics.

By the mid-century, poets were disillusioned with the Modernists and had developed a new kind of poetry altogether that was almost exclusively free verse. Free verse does not use meter or rhyme or have any standardized organization. The new postmodern poets argued that older poets and their formal poetry were snobbish. Furthermore, many artists rejected the traditional styles considered "classical," and adhered to by Romantic poets, because of general distaste at the time for everything Victorian.³⁹ Finally, the political radicalization of the 1960s resulted in dramatic societal and cultural shifts, including the reinvention of literature, films, and other arts. Allen Ginsberg, a gay poet born in the same year as Merrill (1926), epitomized the Beat generation and radical voice with which this generation of poets is associated. The stark contrast between Ginsberg and Merrill shows the conservative nature of Merrill's work in comparison to free verse. While Ginsberg's work attempts to "capture the contemporary spirit of cultural and sexual revolution,"⁴⁰ unrestrained by meter, Merrill completely rejected the idea that experimentation with avant-garde poetics was the only way to revolutionize poetry.⁴¹

In addition to developing new forms of poetry, mid-century poets created a type of poetry defined by its subject matter. Confessional poetry focused on intense personal content, with the poet acting as the main narrative

³³ Ibid., 35.

³⁴ Robert Phillips, "Assessing the New Formalism (So-Called)," *The Hudson Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 147.

³⁵ Earl H. Rovit, "The Shape of American Poetry," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* bd. 6 (1961): 123.

³⁶ *American National Biography Online*, s.v. "Poetry," by Donald D. Kummings, accessed June 12, 2014,

http://www.anb.org/cush_poetry.html.

³⁷ Dolan, "American Poetry," 39.

³⁸ Frederick Feirstein, ed., *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative and the New Formalism* (Santa Cruz: Story Line, 1989): 125.

³⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁰ Catherine A. Davies, *Whitman's Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epics* (New York: Continuum International, 2012), 79.

⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

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voice. It has been argued that free verse facilitates this practice because it creates a familiar tone, allowing the author to be more personal.⁴² By contrast to confessional poets, Merrill ensured a distance between himself and the characters in his poetry by identifying with other poets, such as Elizabeth Bishop.⁴³ Although some of Merrill's work focuses on a "version" of himself as the main character, it is not considered confessional because Merrill presents the character as a version of himself conveyed by a fictional third person narration.

By the 1980s, poets started to reinstate formalism in poetry arguing that so much of poetry is predicated on formalism that free verse is not really poetry at all. This movement is called new formalism. The rise of new formalism has been followed by a debate between two camps: one side that supports traditional frameworks and one side that supports free verse. New formalists have reinstated the traditions of lyricism, rhyme, and meter, but the content of poems has changed from that of classic formalism. Informed by the radical poets of the revolution era, poetry no longer focuses on "conventional images" like nature and bucolic landscapes; these traditional topics have been "displaced by rude imagery."⁴⁴ Merrill was too old by the time new formalism launched to be considered a leader of the movement, but nuanced criticisms of his work by poets such as Charles Martin and Timothy Steele have acknowledged his contribution to ensuring a future for formalism in the United States.

Occultism

According to Timothy Materer, "the mixture of distinct strains of spiritual experience as well as secrecy characterizes the occult."⁴⁵ Occult poetry is more narrowly defined as the use of spiritual or ritualistic practice as a launching point for literary creativity. In the West, the occult has drawn from a variety of sources ranging from Hermeticism, Indian mysticism, the Cabbala, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, to Rosicrucianism. Early secret occult societies emphasized the legacy of these traditions to bolster fictional claims to antiquity and these societies grew in popularity during the Renaissance and even the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ Although "in the colonial era many personal libraries contained treatises on occult philosophy," interest in the occult was little more than a passing curiosity for most Americans before the late nineteenth century.⁴⁷ But by the mid- to late nineteenth century, America's burgeoning Spiritualist movement had enticed practitioners of the occult such as Helena Blavatsky. Unlike most Spiritualists who sought contact with the dead and who did not associate this practice with a secret or hidden knowledge, Blavatsky and her patron, Henry S. Olcott, sought "the secret wisdom of specific ancient magical adepts."⁴⁸ In 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott, who had courted and wooed many followers, mostly from the upper class, established the Theosophical Society. With this organization, Blavatsky and Olcott provided an intellectual basis for spiritualism.

The Theosophical movement became especially popular in Ireland and included among its members W. B. Yeats (who was influenced by previous literary Occultists like Victor Hugo). Yeats, in turn, inspired

⁴² Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), xvii. Martin argues that confessional poetry made it easier for poets to express themselves, which in turn helped queer poets find a way to voice their experience, diversifying the field of poetry. Confessional poetry also helped working class poets and poets of color, especially Native Americans.

⁴³ Even though in *The Changing Light at Sandover* Merrill uses JM for James Merrill and DJ for David Jackson, in later interviews he assures his readers that the characters in the poem are not him and Jackson, but rather fictional stand-ins. Catherine A. Davies, *Whitman's Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epics* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 13.

⁴⁴ Phillips, "Assessing New Formalism," 150.

⁴⁵ Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), xii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴⁷ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 52.

⁴⁸ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), 178.

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subsequent poets, including Modernists such as Ezra Pound, H. D., and T. S. Eliot, as well as mid-century poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Duncan, Ted Hughes, and James Merrill, all of whom used occult practice in some of their works.⁴⁹ W. B. Yeats was, in fact, one of the main guides of Merrill's own occult work. Merrill had begun studying Yeats intensely in high school and he later continued this study under the tutelage of Kimon Friar at Amherst College.

Many poets such as W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound used occult ideas as inspiration for their work before Merrill adopted the practice in some of his later work, but Merrill's work remains particularly creative in its use of decades' worth of transcriptions from Ouija board sessions. Merrill and his partner, David Jackson, used a Ouija board, first one created by Parker Brothers and later a homemade board.⁵⁰ Unlike Yeats who "clearly regarded automatic writing as a potential means to poetic inspiration [but]...seldom if ever evoked his spiritualist experiences," Merrill "embraced the [Ouija] board's revelations and used them, over a period of thirty years, to construct a sweepingly complex visionary poetics."⁵¹

Homoerotic Poetry and the Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry

Most literary critics who study homosexual and queer trends in American poetry agree that the American queer and homosexual tradition in poetry began with the contributions of Walt Whitman.⁵² Much of Whitman's work integrated the vision of a nation that would accept same-sex/same-gender relationships.⁵³ The poetry of Whitman, who was aware of his own sexuality, is often "misread because the readers have not always understood the ways in which the poet used their text as a way of announcing and defining their homosexuality."⁵⁴ Few studies have explored sexuality in American poetry until fairly recently.⁵⁵

Whitman is one of the most talented American poets, providing an example for subsequent poets including Hart Crane, W. H. Auden, Frank O'Hara, and James Merrill. In his 1855 masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman lays forth an American epic and also boldly pronounces his homosexuality by discussing his relationships with male lovers. *Leaves of Grass* "explored [the] freedom and beauty" of America, particularly the country's young, working-class citizens.⁵⁶ One of Whitman's most explicit lines comes from the poem "Live Oak, With Moss," from *Leaves of Grass*, which reads: "The one to remain hung on the other's neck and passionately kissed him-while the one to depart tightly prest on the one to remain in his arm." Scholars suggest that the poem is about Whitman's reconciliation with loving and leaving a lover.⁵⁷ In many publications of *Leaves of Grass*, publishers intentionally left out the series, contributing to the lack of academic attention to homosexuality in Whitman's writing.⁵⁸ Scholars have also pointed out that gays and lesbians after Whitman would have identified with the "sense of shame and isolation" described in his works.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Materer, *Modernist Alchemy*, 21.

⁵⁰ Helen Sword, "James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija," *American Literature*, 66, no. 3 (September 1994): 556.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 554, 557.

⁵² The terms "homosexual" and "queer" may or may not be used interchangeably depending on audience, meaning, and subject. Homosexuality is a term applied to earlier groups of people that we would now consider to be gay, queer, or LGBTQ.

⁵³ Davies, *Whitman's Children*, 23.

⁵⁴ Martin, *Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, xvi.

⁵⁵ Davies, *Whitman's Children*, 14.

⁵⁶ *American National Biography Online*, s.v. "Poetry," by Donald D. Kummings, accessed June 12, 2014, http://www.anb.org/cush_poetry.html.

⁵⁷ Hershel Parker, "The Real 'Live Oak with Moss': Straight Talk About Whitman's 'Gay Manifesto,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 2 (September 1996): 147.

⁵⁸ Parker, "Straight Talk," 153.

⁵⁹ Alan Helms, "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss': The Walt Whitman Archive," in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, ed. Robert K. Martin, 185-205 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

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This sense of isolation continued with Hart Crane, one of America's most important epic poets. Crane admired and corresponded with other contemporary authors such as E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams. After receiving an inheritance, Crane moved to Europe to distance himself from his mother. In the end, his despair proved too much and Crane took his own life by throwing himself overboard from the steamship the *Orizaba* en route to the United States from Mexico. Various accounts suggest that Crane committed suicide following several unsuccessful propositions of male crewmembers.⁶⁰ Crane's work has been characterized as difficult to understand because he veiled his homosexuality with convoluted language or terms that would only be understood by other homosexuals.⁶¹ Many of Crane's critics overlooked his homosexual tendencies because of the difficulties in interpreting his work. More recent scholarship has clarified that much of Crane's work, especially his lengthy epic *The Bridge*, cloaked homosexual cultural references that made it particularly difficult to discern its "true" meaning. Crane's poetry can be decoded by understanding the cultural and social practices of homosexuals.⁶²

While much of the work of Crane and even Whitman remained unstudied due to a poor understanding of homosexual culture, the sexual themes implied in these poems were more openly expressed in the work of later poets such as Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, and James Merrill. Merrill, especially in his epic works like *The Changing Light at Sandover*, chronicles queer friendships and sexual relationships within the historical and intellectual context of Platonic Greece.⁶³ Poets have also switched the gender of the characters to be the opposite gender when they were talking about same-gendered love. Merrill did this on several occasions, as well as writing about himself as a feminine character, drawing on historic connotations of the homosexual as an inverted or emasculated man. On the other end of the spectrum were more radical mid-century artists, whose sexual poetry was more explicit.

By the 1960s, America was in severe turmoil as shifting sexual mores along with tensions over the war in Vietnam and racial inequality created a fractious environment. Throughout the decade and well into the 1970s, artists and poets in particular confronted a variety of overtly political and cultural issues in their works. One of these artists was Allen Ginsberg, who discussed homosexuality quite explicitly in his poetry, unlike many of his predecessors. Ginsberg, for example, wrote about "public parks and cemeteries" where gay men cruised for sex or "a partition in a Turkish Bath where the blond & naked angel[s] came."⁶⁴ The overt sexual descriptions and phallic imagery of Ginsberg's work reflected changing times and a broadening push for acceptance of homosexuality during the 1960s and 1970s.

Ginsberg's works and those of activists in the same era opened the way for homosexuality to be widely acknowledged, especially in literary circles. Like Ginsberg, Merrill discussed his homosexuality fairly openly, although his work is much less explicit than that of Ginsberg. Merrill's work more openly explored his life as a gay man as he grows older. Some of Merrill's final poems discussed the impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay community from the end of the 1980s to the early 1990s, such as in his volume *The Inner Room*, which discusses the ravages of AIDS.⁶⁵ The epidemic devastated the gay male community, and by 2002, almost half a million Americans had died from HIV/AIDS-related diseases.⁶⁶ Throughout this period, perceptions of the gay and queer communities were in flux. While the belief that homosexuals were deviants who needed medical

⁶⁰ Paul Mariani, *The Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 413-414, 419, 421.

⁶¹ Tim Dean, "Hart Crane's Poetics of Privacy," *American Literary History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 84.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶³ James A Notopoulos, "The Divided Line of the Platonic Tradition," *The Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (January 31, 1935): 59.

⁶⁴ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl: And Other Poems* (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1959), lines 36-40.

⁶⁵ Timothy Materer, "James Merrill's Late Poetry: AIDS and the 'Stripping Process,'" *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 127.

⁶⁶ Paul S. Boyer, *Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 464.

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attention had led to threats and harassment by police up to and into the late 1960s, the raid on the Stonewall Inn in 1969 (NHL, Designated 2000) led to a shift toward greater activism in the decades that followed. This greater activism led, in turn, to a push to improve education, legal protections, and the lifting of government limitations on homosexuals.⁶⁷ Today, increased understanding of the LGBTQ community as well as increased attention to LGBTQ poetry has allowed for new and more refined studies of prominent queer and homosexual poets, including Merrill.

Merrill's Early Works

Merrill left a wide variety of work that matured over his career. His greatest work developed from occult practices which incorporated his experience as a gay man. Merrill used some of his earlier works to resolve his personal struggles as a homosexual teenager with disapproving parents. His early work included *The Black Swan* and *First Poems*. It also included poems, such as "The Country of A Thousand Years of Peace" (1959), dedicated to Hans Lodeizen, a classmate and close friend who died of leukemia at the age of twenty-six. The content of this poem also sets up the stage for Merrill's later exploration of relationships with deceased loved ones using a Ouija Board.

One of Merrill's earliest works published after he reached maturity was *Water Street* (1962). Materer, writes that "*Water Street* is where Merrill finds his mature voice in the opening...."⁶⁸ The 1962 work is less about his personal anguish but filled with puns like "crystal-queer" and home life in Stonington, which played key roles in several series of his poems throughout his career. *Water Street*, like many of his early poems, kept to rigorous stanza patterns. When asked about this form, Merrill said, "I always relapse into a strict poem. I'd like to think I would continue to write strict poems when I felt like it. But what you say is true. I remember... after *First Poems* was published, having in mind the kind of poem I wanted to write."⁶⁹ The collection was also highly praised by his friends and critics, though it did not receive any notable awards. Elizabeth Bishop, one of his several lesbian acquaintances and respected colleagues, wrote to Merrill with encouragement, saying, "*Water Street* was a great step ahead for you thanks to lots of new spontaneous easy sounding imagery."⁷⁰

Water Street is characteristic of Merrill's career in that it draws from personal experience and discusses his homosexuality while also using the framework of traditional canon. In the work he uses an arrangement of meters and forms including quatrains, quintets, sestets, and octaves; sonnets and villanelles; and longer poems; some poems incorporated all of these.⁷¹ As previously discussed, 107 Water Street was the home where Merrill lived with his partner, David Jackson. Catherine Davies notes that *Water Street* was Merrill's first adventure into more confessional/autobiographical works, in which he discussed influences on his life but was never the primary narrator. Although the poems talked about matters that were pertinent to Merrill's life, he was able to bury them using literary techniques. Robert von Hallberg suggests that Merrill wrote autobiographical details into his work to make his poetry richer as well as to complicate the subject matter that otherwise would make a "light verse about love affairs."⁷² The title of the poem, *Water Street*, allows the informed reader to understand that the poem takes place in a domestic setting. By implying that the poem is named for his home, the title

⁶⁷ Adapted from the National Historic Landmarks study *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites*, rev. ed. (2002, repr., Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2008).

⁶⁸ Timothy Materer, "Confession and Autobiography," 174.

⁶⁹ Rachel Hadas, "James Merrill's Early Work: A Reevaluation," *The Kenyon Review* (New Series) 20, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 178.

⁷⁰ Timothy Materer, "Mirrored Lives," 188.

⁷¹ Evans Lansing Smith, *James Merrill, Postmodern Magus: Myth and Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 55.

⁷² Robert von Hallberg, "James Merrill: 'Revealing by Obscuring,'" *Contemporary Literature* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1980): 551. See also Ashley Brown, "An Interview with James Merrill," *Shenandoah* 19 (Summer 1968), 4.

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indicates that the poem must also address Merrill's personal life, which includes his partnership with David Jackson.⁷³

Early Award-Winning Works

The first work that brought critical attention to Merrill's career was *Nights and Days*. Many poems in this work focus on love, family, and personal experience, as well as delving into mythological fantasy, including Greek god. *Nights and Days* contains two poems, "Days of 1964" and "The Thousand and Second Night," that each show Merrill's increased ability to confront his homosexuality openly.⁷⁴ The poems are still framed within the traditional canon, using meter, rhyme, lyrical format, metaphor, and other literary devices, but Merrill writes about sexuality without masking it as much as he did earlier in his career. For example, in "Days of 1964" Merrill writes:

I had gone so long without loving
I hardly knew what I was thinking.
Where I hid my face, your touch, quick, merciful,
Blindfolded me. A god breathed from my lips.
If that was illusion I wanted it to last long;
To dwell, for its pittance, with us there,
Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain.

The lines recall a sexual encounter with a male lover who is presumably Greek. Merrill is not secretive about the gender of his lover; by referring to a "god," he indicates that the person kissing him is male. These lines reflect greater boldness in discussing sexuality, yet the reader still has to be relatively cultured to grasp the intricacies and subtleties that Merrill employs.

Stephen Yenser's analysis shows that Merrill implicitly discusses homosexuality in other poems, such as "Carnival." The poem discusses the life of the poet before he was drafted in World War II. Yenser argues that Merrill presents scenes in the poem as Merrill's adolescence, suggesting that the voice in the poem is in fact Merrill's, such as when he writes about relationships with his boyhood friends.⁷⁵ This again shows that Merrill writes in a semi-confessional style without explicitly placing himself as a character at the center of the work. The poem goes on to reference domesticity when Merrill speaks of a "new wife." Yenser insinuates that in this case Merrill switches pronouns in order to mask his sexuality, a literary device also used by previous queer poets like Whitman and Crane.⁷⁶

Despite the homosexual undertones of *Nights and Days*, Merrill relies on the works of former poets in the traditional canon as well as other advances into mythical and magical poetry. In several of his poems he looks to work by Yeats for guidance in style and content. Like Yeats, Merrill builds on the classical tales of *Arabian Nights*. Yeats wrote a poem called "Byzantium," which Merrill responds to with "A Thousand and One Nights." The reliance on Yeats' work is so heavy that Merrill writes Yeats into one of his works.⁷⁷

Merrill takes the opportunity in *Nights and Days* to perfect complex literary devices. His poem "The Thousand and Second Night" displays his fascination with Janusian thinking.⁷⁸ Janusian thinking, derived from Roman

⁷³ See Langdon Hammer, "James Merrill's Water Street (1951-1961)," *Parnassus: Poetry Review* 32, no. ½ (January 2, 2011).

⁷⁴ Materer, "Mirrored Lives," 190.

⁷⁵ Stephen Yenser, *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 131.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Postmodern Magus*, 63.

⁷⁸ Yenser, *Consuming Myth*, 112.

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theories, involves posing antithetical thoughts simultaneously. Merrill used Janusian thought effectively, showing the depth of his talent. In *Nights and Days* Merrill employs his infamous technique of interrupting himself and introducing several voices.⁷⁹ In addition to relying on the traditions of former poets and literary devices, *Nights and Days* contains poems that demonstrate a growing shift towards the occult. “The Thousand and Second Night,” “A Carpet Not Bought,” and “From the Cupola” all lean towards the occult. They can be considered evidence of a “postmodern interest in creating classic fairy tales.” Starting in his high school days, Merrill used references to classical figures, modeling his work after poets like Yeats.⁸⁰

Occult Works

Many of Merrill’s works centralize imaginative or magical elements, including pieces that use classical literature to create metaphor. It was not until Merrill’s *Mirabell* (the second installment of *The Changing Light at Sandover*) that he broke into the occult. Merrill transcribed thousands of pages of notes that he collected while using the Ouija board and collected them into an epic poem. The poem revealed a tiered spirit world shown to Merrill and Jackson by their spirit guides. When the three-part work was complete, he published *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The lengthy poem contains a tour of the afterlife, shown to them by their guides W. H. Auden, Ephraim, and their deceased friends, Maya Deren and Maria Mitsotaki. The two men find different levels and realms of spirits, many of which seem to be associated with a close circle of inner friends. Through their guides, Jackson and Merrill connect with the spirits of Archangel Michael, artists and writers including Dante and Yeats, and deceased family members like Jackson’s parents and Merrill’s father. Merrill’s imagination and creativity in *The Changing Light at Sandover* embody his Formalist style in a way that allows him to use occult practices to write a poem about a homosexual landscape.

Most of Merrill’s critics agree that *The Changing Light at Sandover* was his pinnacle work. One author praised Merrill’s epic, saying, “Throughout his career, as critics have observed, Merrill’s poetry is notable for its wit and urbanity; he is essentially convivial or social, and social observations are one of his greatest strengths... Merrill above all else, is a poet of voice, and a voice is one of wit and elegance.”⁸¹ Throughout the over 500 page epic poem Merrill makes use of controlled rhyme and meter, assigning particular meters to certain voices. Most characters speak in iambic pentameter of rhyming couplets, but angels usually communicate with unrhymed fourteen syllable lines. An attentive reader can distinguish the character voice by identifying the meter employed.⁸² Merrill is also given tremendous credit for being self-consciously aware of the devices (such as the Ouija board) and literary motifs that he uses as well as their implications.⁸³

At the time of the publication of *Mirabell*, critics considered Merrill’s work to be related to New Ageism. New Ageist beliefs increased across the country between the 1970s and 1990s. A Gallup poll in 1994 showed that 25% of Americans believed in reincarnation and communication with the dead, and in 1996 another poll suggested that 69% of American believed they felt the presence of angels.⁸⁴ Merrill’s *Mirabell* works within the framework of American fascination with New Ageism. The Ouija board started as a parlor game in the 1950s that was developed as a substitute for card games. It was common for people in the postwar period to reach out to the spirit world for entertainment. The couple originally used a Parker Brothers board given to them by a friend. As they became more experienced, Jackson and Merrill moved to a homemade board, using a teacup for the planchette. Though he used the anachronistic style of formalism, by using the “New Age” Ouija board

⁷⁹ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Postmodern Magus*, 71.

⁸¹ Devin Johnston, *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 105.

⁸² Ibid., 107.

⁸³ Materer, *Modernist Alchemy*, 23.

⁸⁴ Johnston, *Precipitations*, 112.

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Merrill remained contemporary and set himself apart from other midcentury formalist poets. Merrill's creation of an image of the afterlife made his work appealing to many Americans, not just his colleagues and fellow poets. By using the Ouija board, Merrill relied on an ordinary device to inform an extraordinary adventure.

Merrill was not the first or only poet to incorporate occult traditions. He used occult poems written by others as guides for his own pieces. Some of his predecessors, such as Yeats, and a few contemporaries, like Sylvia Plath, also used a Ouija board. Many critics praise Merrill for the fact that (unlike other occult poets) he was aware of the effect of his work and used an ironic tone when talking about the occult.⁸⁵ Although Yeats was aware of his own use of the occult, literary critics argue that he was slightly embarrassed about the tradition, despite his involvement in mystic societies.⁸⁶ Merrill's ability to employ the board and also to be deliberate in his work allowed him to fill poems with metaphors and visions reflective of his life.

Merrill's greatest mastery as a poet is the explicitness of homosexuality, as a theme, in his work. The fraternal landscape and the childless nature of *The Changing Light at Sandover* point towards an exclusive, gay, male culture. The homosexual fraternal order found in Merrill's work became a fashionable literary trope used by other authors and poets only a few years after the publication of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, however, this has been a common device in gay literary literature since ancient Greece. Most of the characters in Merrill's poetry are male. *The Changing Light at Sandover* specifically addresses change in people as they live out different incarnations of their spirits, and many of Merrill's female friends in the spirit world were represented as male even though they were women "in real life." He justified this gender switch by explaining that his female friends were appearing as reincarnations of male spirits. The spectrum of characters provided an "alternative family" representing a homosexual society.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Merrill followed Crane's example by allowing homosexuality to be a focus of *Sandover* (for the educated reader), suggesting that childless men were uniquely privileged both in an "aesthetic and spiritual sense."⁸⁸ One interpretation of *The Changing Light at Sandover* favored by several critics is that "... the central message of the poem controversially suggests that homosexuality and a creative gift are the marker of a privileged 'soul' that can not only make up for the losses of childlessness, but are also in some ways a product of it."⁸⁹

Final Works

Though homosexuality was not tolerated on the scale that it is today, later in his life Merrill was able to write more openly about his life as a gay man than he had in the past. This is demonstrated clearly in some of his final works, which explore the effects of HIV/AIDS on the queer community. Many of these works remained unstudied for decades due to the invisibility of queer writers in academic study; queer studies have only recently been incorporated into the academy. Merrill's final works paid tribute to his friends who had died of AIDS, as well as addressing his own struggle with the disease.

The Inner Room (1988) was Merrill's first work to touch on the ravages of HIV/AIDS in the queer community. One poem in the collection, called "Prose of Departure," discusses Merrill's travels in Japan with Peter Hooten while his close friend David Kalstone is in New York City receiving an AIDS diagnosis. In his paper about Merrill's works on AIDS, Timothy Materer states that Merrill's incorporation of a *hokku*, a traditional Japanese form of poetry, indicates an attempt to keep a lighthearted tone while talking about the serious topic of his friend's illness. Merrill attempts to have triumphant endings to his poems about the deaths and fatal illnesses of

⁸⁵ Materer, *Modernist Alchemy*, 2.

⁸⁶ Sword, "James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Politics of Ouija," 554.

⁸⁷ Davies, *Whitman's Children*, 143. Personal communication with Chad Bennett, December 12, 2014.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*.

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close friends by imitating *hokku*.⁹⁰ Kalstone died in 1986 near the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and only a few years before more of Merrill's friends would contract the disease, further influencing his work.

Several of Merrill's other poems from this era focus on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. The poems also capture the increased marginalization and homophobia that gay men experienced as the disease proliferated. In "Tony: Ending the Life," Merrill refers to "the Great Plague (your sickness)," driving at the negative connotations of what was then called GRIDS (Gay Related Immune Deficiency). Gay and straight poets alike came to use the word "plague" to talk about the ravages of AIDS on the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s.

The poems in Merrill's final work describe the end of life, but instead of showing dread or panic, they speak of death matter-of-factly. *A Scattering of Salts*, published posthumously, had a marked emphasis on dying associated with HIV/AIDS. *A Scattering of Salts* stands out as a metaphor representing Merrill's struggle to confront the nature of his death.

A Scattering of Salts includes several poems that reflect Merrill's life and his increasingly failing health as AIDS weakened him. The poems "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek Windbreaker" and "Losing the Marbles" both talk about weakness and loss of cognitive abilities. Merrill's anticipation of death becomes clear when he writes of coffins and the suicides of friends who don't want to face dying of AIDS.⁹¹ In "Losing the Marbles," Merrill references Dylan Thomas's famous poem "Dying of the Light" when he writes "'Rage against the dying of the light.' / but really— age? .../These dreaming blinking out." This line shows that Merrill lacks the energy to fight his disease and acknowledges his weakness. Finally, Merrill writes an elegy for himself in "Oranges," discussing complications with his mother; his relationship with Friar; and his relationship with Jackson, especially as it eroded when Hooten became a part of Merrill's life. In all of these poems, the emotional impact comes from the poet's own self-awareness, showing the final level of artistic maturity that Merrill reached towards the end of his life. Materer says, "In his own way, Merrill also stands in judgment on his soul in asking to be remembered as a man of 'taste and sunlight,' which his harshest critics cannot deny."⁹²

Conclusion

Ultimately AIDS led to Merrill's death after several years of decline. From his youth to his death, Merrill had focused his work on personal issues, including his sexuality and relationships with other men. Though his work relied on a formalist framework, it evolved from short love poems written while he was a teenager to one of the most important works of twentieth-century poetry, a 500 page occult epic written during the height of America's fascination with New Ageism and devices such as the Ouija board. Throughout his career Merrill wrote about and incorporated lovers and family members into his work using metaphor, meter, and patterns of text. Merrill's work reflects a prolific and talented author who drew on many factors to create a body of work that deserves more attention.

Comparable Properties to the James Merrill House

James Merrill provides an example of how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people shaped the cultural fabric of the United States. Historically, many of America's most respected artists, authors, and actors have been queer in some manner.⁹³ However, many political and social factors made it difficult for these Americans

⁹⁰ Timothy Materer, "James Merrill's Late Poetry," 124. As mentioned in the text, there are only a few pieces that discuss homosexuality in Merrill's work. Of these, only a few deal with HIV/AIDS. I draw heavily on the few existing texts that do address this issue since it is an important one that should be more central to the study of his work and the works of other LGBTQ poets.

⁹¹ Materer, "James Merrill's Late Poetry," 124.

⁹² Ibid., 143.

⁹³ For further reading see Michael S. Sherry's *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy*.

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to be comfortable, out, or even visible. This phenomenon produced a subculture of LGBTQ American life that has only recently started to receive attention.⁹⁴ Because LGBTQ life remains hidden, historians and American culture experts have focused on studying the LGBTQ community in major cities like New York, Buffalo, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.⁹⁵ The James Merrill house is important in the effort to uncover this history and designate more sites related to LGBTQ communities in the United States.

Historically, the transient lives of many poets, like Whitman and Ginsberg, makes it difficult to identify properties associated with their productive careers. Many poets, such as Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, and Elizabeth Bishop, among others, traveled often and did not reside at the same place for very long. Poets and artists moved so frequently that evidence of their residence is minimal. Since poets were often not associated with a single place for long during their productive careers, it complicates the task of selecting a site that is closely associated with a poet and his work. Many works took years to complete, during which the poet may have resided in multiple homes.

Other Properties Associated with James Merrill

The only other property associated with the poet's productive career is a vacation home in Key West, which he owned with his partner David Jackson. Key West was a prime literary retreat for mid-century poets and became a small enclave of poets and writers. However, this property's association with his productive career is not as strong as the home in Connecticut, especially since he produced little work at this location.⁹⁶

Properties Associated with Occult Poets

Sylvia Plath, 337 Elm Street, Northampton, Massachusetts

Sylvia Plath was a well-known, mid-century modern poet. She also wrote a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, which tells the story of a young woman suffering from depression. Plath committed suicide at the young age of thirty, prompting Timothy Materer to write, "The critical reaction to both *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* (one of her best poems) were inevitably influenced by the manner of Plath's death at thirty."⁹⁷ Most of the criticism of *Ariel* and other works by Plath were complemented by her early death, leading to claims that her work alone did not make her a stand-out poet. Despite any of Plath's shortcomings as a poet, she is highly respected today. She received the Glasscock Prize in 1955 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry posthumously in 1982 for her collected poems. Unlike Merrill, Plath often chose to use free verse; however, her work also incorporated occult influences like the Ouija board.⁹⁸

337 Elm Street was Plath's home when she began writing one of her major collections. This was during her first year or so back from England after winning a Fulbright scholarship. Her home is a contributing resource to the Elm Street Historic District (National Register, 1990). Plath lived in this home for only a short time. Her occult work is not nearly as influential as that of Merrill and his occult work had greater influence on other authors than Plath ever would. Though Plath looked to the occult, her work was more influenced by life

⁹⁴ Gail Dubrow, "Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags," in *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation*, eds. Gail Dubrow and Jennifer Goodman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 282.

⁹⁵ Major New York subcultures were traced in George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*.

⁹⁶ It is unclear if this home has survived.

⁹⁷ "Sylvia Plath, 1932-1963," Poetry Foundation, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/sylvia-plath>.

⁹⁸ Materer, *Modernist Alchemy*, 21.

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experiences as an abused female child and a clinically-depressed adult woman stifled by an unhappy marriage in the 1950s and '60s.⁹⁹

**Edgar Allen Poe House, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (NHL, 1962);
203 Amity Street, Baltimore, Maryland (NHL, 1971);
206 Bradford Avenue, Fayetteville, North Carolina (NRHP, 1983)**

Edgar Allen Poe was the first notable American poet to use the occult in his work. In the antebellum period, Poe was known for dark stories and poems and was fascinated by mesmerism. He placed mysticism at the center of some of his best-received works, such as the "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher."¹⁰⁰ Poe was born in Richmond, Virginia, but moved several times due to financial challenges. Poe could be considered the grandfather of occultism in America. Although both authors used occultism as an important element in their work, their writings are not wholly comparable since they belong to two different generations and centuries. Moreover, Poe's literary cannon does not deal with homoerotic content or homosexuality.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁰ Horowitz, *Occult America*, chap. 1, pg. 21.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register. NR # 13000618, 08/28/2013

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: less than an acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	19	256773	4579883

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundaries are designated by map id 101/194 in Stonington Tax Assessor Records.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the footprint of the property which is historically associated with James Merrill and retains a high degree of historic integrity.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

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NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS PROGRAM
September 10, 2015

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE

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Photos

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West elevation, looking southeast

Photograph by Rachel Carley, Preservation Consultant, 2014



South elevation, looking northwest

Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014

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North storefronts, looking east
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014



Storefront marquee, looking south
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014

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Second-floor south, ceiling, looking east
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014



Guest apartment library, looking south
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014

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Dining-room ceiling, looking east
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014



Sitting room, looking north
Photography by Rachel Carley, 2014

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Attic studio, looking northwest
Photography by Rachel Carley, 2014



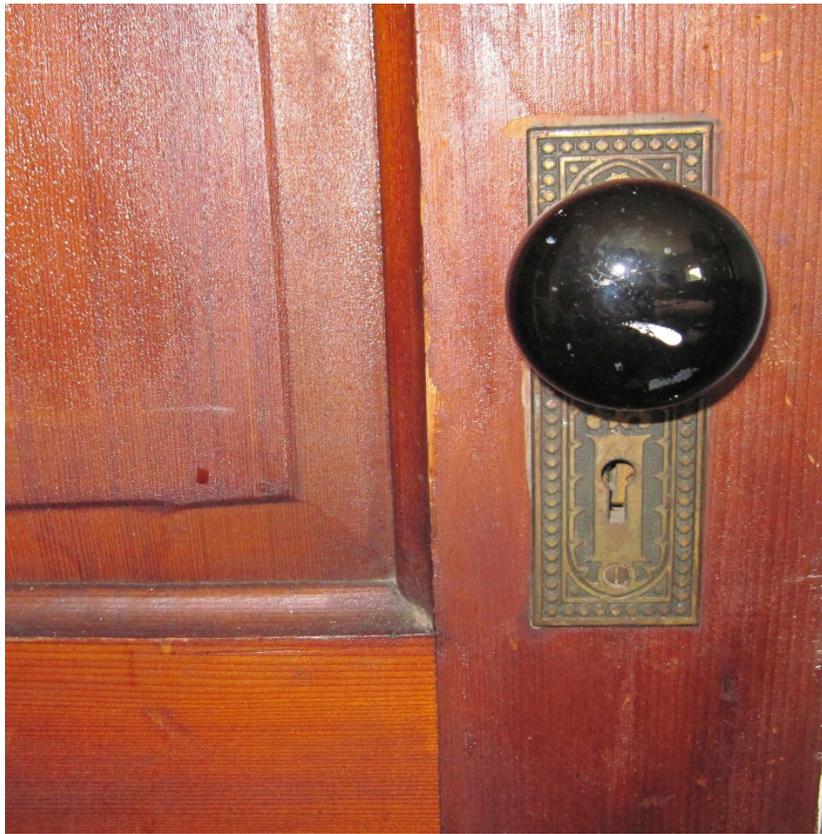
Rooftop view, looking southwest to Fishers Island
Photography by Rachel Carley, 2014

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Door hardware.
Photograph by Rachel Carley, 2014



Water Street looking North, Stonington, Conn.
Water Street and James Merrill House
Courtesy of Stonington Historical Society, ca. 1910

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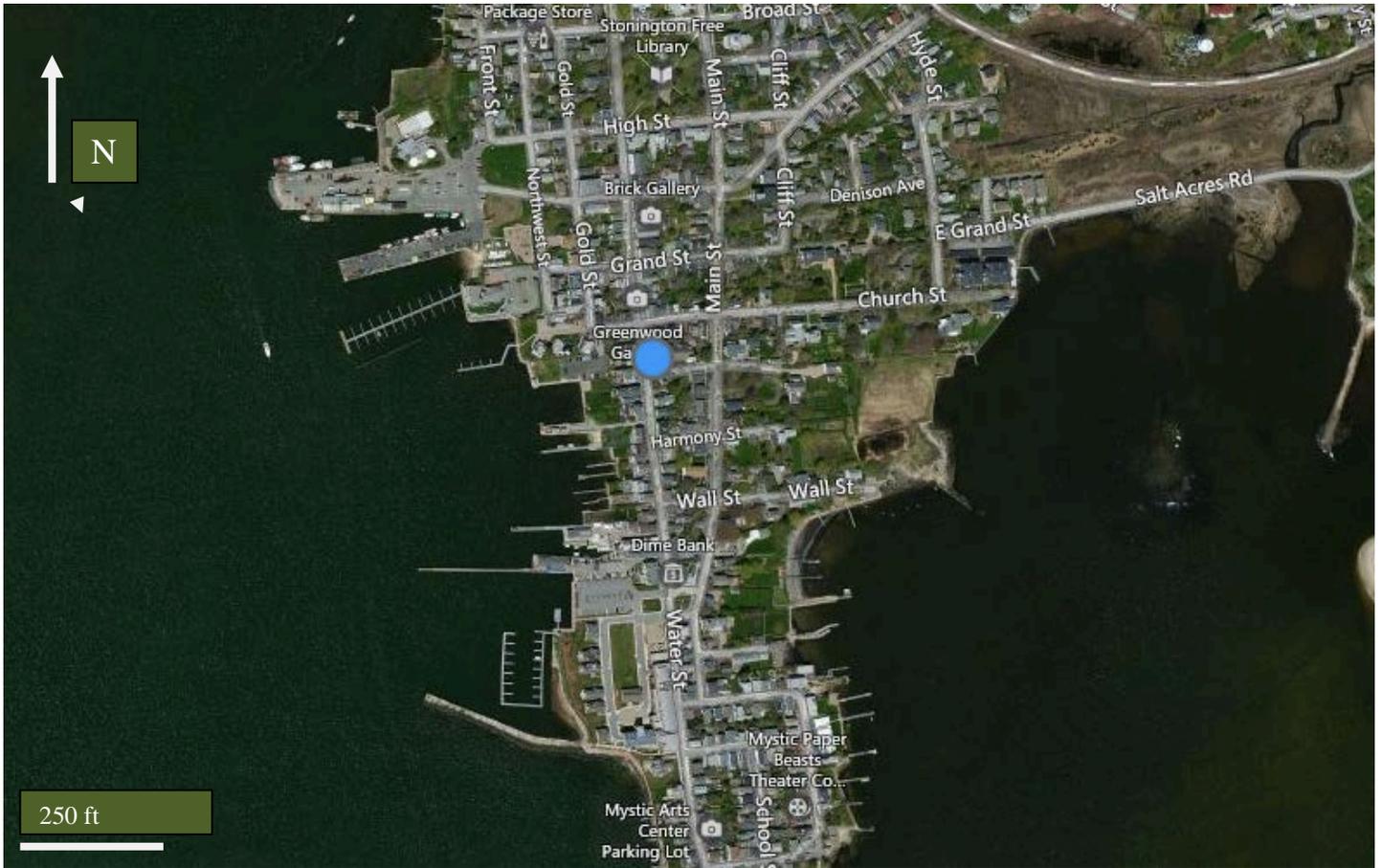
David Jackson and James Merrill at 107 Water Street.
Image by Rollie McKenna. Courtesy of Stonington Historical Society, 1961

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Maps

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Source: Bing Maps; Datum: NAD84

James Merrill House
Stonington, Connecticut
41.333736,-71.906624

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE

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Source: Bing Maps; Datum: NAD84

James Merrill House
Stonington, Connecticut
41.333736,-71.906624