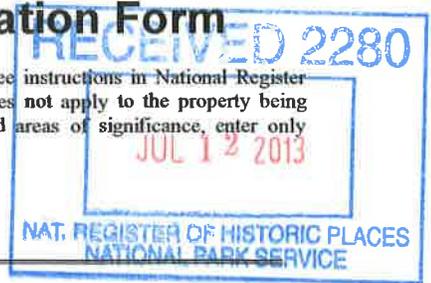


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

### 1. Name of Property

Historic name: Merrill, James, House  
Other names/site number: Burtch Block  
Name of related multiple property listing:  
N/A  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

### 2. Location

Street & number: 107 Water Street  
City or town: Stonington State: CT County: New London  
Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national  statewide  local  
Applicable National Register Criteria:  
 A  B  C  D

Stacy Vario DSHPO 7/1/13  
Signature of certifying official/Title: Date  
CT State Historic Preservation Office  
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  
Signature of commenting official: Date  
Title : State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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**4. 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:) \_\_\_\_\_

*for* 

Signature of the Keeper

8/28/13

Date of Action

---

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:

Public – Local

Public – State

Public – Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)

District Site

Structure

Object

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**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>          </u>	buildings
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	sites
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	structures
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>          </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register           

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- DOMESTIC: single dwelling
- COMMERCIAL/TRADE: specialty store
- SOCIAL: meeting hall

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- DOMESTIC: multiple dwelling
- COMMERCE/TRADE: specialty store

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN: Victorian eclectic

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### Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

foundation: STONE: granite

walls: WOOD: shingle

Roof: ASPHALT

## Narrative Description

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### Summary Paragraph

The 1901 James Merrill House is a late-Victorian commercial/residential block 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 James Ingram Merrill (1926–95) and his partner David Noyes Jackson (1922–2001), 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 décor that remains largely intact. The structure 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 (north and south ends) that occupy the former club rooms. 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 throughout the year to the public. The property is in good condition and has undergone relatively few alterations since its construction.

### Narrative Description

Stonington Borough is one of multiple villages, including Lords Point, Pawcatuck, Wequetequock and the eastern portions of Mystic and Old Mystic, that make up 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

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single viaduct passing over the tracks provides the only access by land. To the west is Stonington Harbor, and to the east and south lies Fishers Island Sound. Narrow lanes and rights-of-way 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 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 a distinctly salty ambience.

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 (Map 1). 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, designed in 1889 by the noted New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White.

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 between. Yet another pattern—zigzag novelty shingles—distinguishes the cantilevered semi-circular tower that anchors the building's southwest corner.

Both the long, west façade (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 (Photographs 1 and 2). 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 just visible on the rooftop. The bulk of the structure is painted gray, with the molded window frames on the stop stories accented in cream; the first-story window trim and the lower level of the Union Street elevation are painted white.

The principal, Water Street elevation 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 (Photograph 3). 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 façade, 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.

*See Section 7, Continuation Sheet*

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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**Areas of Significance**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LITERATURE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**  
1956-1995  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**  
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)  
JAMES MERRILL  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**  
Scholfield, Lindsay & Liebig (roof addition)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The James Merrill House is nationally significant for its close, forty-one-year association with James Ingram Merrill (1926–95), one of his generation’s most acclaimed poets—considered peerless among his contemporaries who were writing in meter and rhyme (Criterion B). Over the course of his extraordinary career, this erudite and accomplished writer produced twenty-five volumes of poetry, along with three plays, two novels, numerous essays and a memoir. The multilingual author also translated dozens of works of other poets into French, Portuguese, Dutch and modern Greek, and contributed countless introductions, forewords and afterwords to the publications of his colleagues. Merrill’s impressive canon of work garnered nearly every major award in his field, including the Pulitzer Prize; two National Book Awards in Poetry; the National Book Critics Circle Award; the Library of Congress’s first Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry; Yale’s Bollingen Prize for Poetry; and the Medal of Honor for Literature from the National Arts Club.

Merrill produced virtually all his major writing during his ownership of 107 Water Street, between 1956 and 1995 (Criterion G), and during this period Stonington came to play a vital role in the poet’s life. The Water Street apartment he shared with David Jackson became a magnet for leading intellectuals and cultural figures of the day, while Merrill’s poetry increasingly resonated with references to the pleasures and peccadilloes of life in this close-knit community. It was on the merits of his “quintessentially Connecticut voice” that James Merrill was named the state’s first poet laureate in 1986. Publishers have continued to recognize Merrill’s contribution to American literature with posthumous volumes, including *Collected Poems* (2001) and *Selected Poems* (2008), both issued by Alfred A. Knopf. *Collected Poems* is the first in a series that will present all Merrill’s work, including his novels, plays and collected prose, excepting his stand-alone 560-page epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, produced in sequential parts.

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### Narrative Statement of Significance

Stonington’s colonial history dates as far back as 1649, when the first English residents settled on Wequetequock Cove, just to the northeast of the borough. A trading post on the nearby Pawcatuck River followed a year later. The present village’s location on a protected harbor with direct access to coastal shipping lanes destined the settlement to its rich maritime heritage. Owing to commercial interests in the colonial-era West Indies trade, residents of the arrowhead-shaped peninsula had begun to accumulate significant wealth by the late 1700s. The lucrative enterprises of sealing, whaling and shipbuilding brought the community prosperity throughout most of the following century. In the process, Water Street attracted merchants, ship’s chandlers and other maritime professionals, who jacked up many of the old wooden dwellings there to accommodate lower-level in warehouses of granite and brick.

A separate borough (a specific type of administrative division) was incorporated in 1801, and the town’s first banks and a customhouse opened in the 1840s. The whaling and shipping  
*See Section 8, Continuation Sheet*

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### 9. Major Bibliographical References

**Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)**

See Section 9, Continuation Sheet

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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 (Included in Stonington Village National Register Historic District, 1978)  
 previously determined eligible by the National Register  
 designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

#### Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other  
Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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### 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** .06 acres

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Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- |                         |                       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 41.333571° | Longitude: 71.899618° |
| 2. Latitude:            | Longitude:            |
| 3. Latitude:            | Longitude:            |
| 4. Latitude:            | Longitude:            |

**Or**

**UTM References**

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or  NAD 1983

- |          |           |           |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

**Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)**

The boundaries are as designated by map id: 101/19/3 in the Stonington Tax Assessor records.

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**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries conform to the property boundaries throughout the life of the building and during the period of significance.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Rachel D. Carley  
organization: Preservation Consultant  
street & number: 10 Camp Dutton Road  
city or town: Litchfield state: CT zip code: 06759  
e-mail rcarley@snet.net  
telephone: 860-567-5132  
date: March 27, 2013

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**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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## Photographs

### Photo Log

Name of Property: Merrill, James, House

City or Vicinity: Stonington

County: New London State: CT

Photographer: Rachel D. Carley

Date Photographed: Oct. 2012

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_001  
West elevation, looking southeast

2 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_002  
South elevation, looking northwest

3 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_003  
North Storefronts, looking east

4 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_004  
Storefront marquee, looking south

5 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_005  
Second-floor south, ceiling, looking east

6 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_006  
Guest apartment library, looking south

7 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_007  
Dining-room ceiling, looking east

8 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_008  
Sitting room, looking north

9 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_009  
Attic studio, looking northwest

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10 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_010  
Rooftop view, looking southwest to Fishers Island

11 of 11: CT\_New London County\_James Merrill House\_011  
Door hardware

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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**National Park Service**

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.....  
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**DESCRIPTION**

To its right, the cast-iron base of the corner tower forms a marquee-like hood, rimmed with light bulbs (Photograph 4), for the building's corner entry; this serves the largest of the three retail spaces, 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.

*Interior*

The entire ground floor of the James Merrill House is devoted to its three commercial spaces; each 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 beadboard wainscoting. The two loft-like apartments (ceilings about twelve feet) on the second story maintain the open feeling of the original clubrooms, along with their varnished wood floors, ornate pressed-tin ceilings (Photograph 5), 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 Merrill and Jackson's guest quarters. That apartment consists of a central library area (Photograph 6) 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 front 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 (Photograph 7). A central sitting room (Photograph 8) 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.

From the east side of the telephone room a narrow stair ascends to the attic level, where Merrill and Jackson raised a portion of the roof to create headroom for a studio and music room, tucked under exposed rafters (Photograph 9). 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

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and the harbor and Fishers Island Sound beyond (Photograph 10).

The rooms in both apartments gain particular spatial interest from 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 (Photograph 11).

Of all the interior spaces, the Merrill apartment is the most distinctive, due mainly to Merrill and Jackson's arresting décor—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) for the bedroom; turquoise for the bookshelves; a Mondrian-like 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 (Photograph 7). The sitting room's silk-screened wallpaper, created specifically for Merrill in 1974 by Hubbell Pierce, is the indisputable apartment showstopper, featuring 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 (Photograph 8).

Although intimate in size, the light-filled rooms convey a cozy openness, thanks to freestanding bookcases and large pieces—the sitting room's Venetian pier glass, for example—which help to define 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.

With the exception of the tower's conical roof, believed to be a casualty of New England's famous 1938 hurricane, 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 in kind. Overall, the building retains a very high degree of historic and architectural integrity.

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**SIGNIFICANCE**

associated with this era of industry coincided with the growth of the town’s well-known Portuguese immigrant community, originally made up primarily of sailors from the Azores. (The borough is the oldest to survive in Connecticut, and the town’s Portuguese-established fishing fleet is now the only commercial fishing operation in Connecticut.)

By the 1880s an assortment of small shops—grocery, candy and fruit, bakery, drug store, cobbler’s and meat market—was scattered down the lower half of Water Street, while lumberyards, coal sheds and a fish market occupied the harbor wharves. Built in 1901 by druggist Francis D. Burtch and once known as the Burtch Block, what is now 107 Water Street (James Merrill House) represented a new phase of development as one of Water Street’s first large multi-use buildings (Archival Image 1).<sup>1</sup>

Construction of the new building involved displacement of an earlier dwelling, known variously as the Captain Keen and Tom Wilcox House, which was moved to another location. By clearing the lot in this way, Burtch was able to take advantage of the conspicuous corner site at Union Street to make a statement with a stylish new, income-producing property, complete with corner tower and modern plate-glass storefronts. Requisitioning the best commercial space for himself, the enterprising druggist installed a pharmacy in the south end, where he offered prescription compounding, homemade ice cream and sodas, telegraph service and what was likely the first public telephone in the village. A sequence of butchers and grocers occupied the shops in the north end of the building, and the Mistuxet Club, a men’s social lodge, leased the meeting rooms above. On the third level was a spacious ten-room apartment, shared at various times by Francis with May Burtch, a milliner who had a shop downstairs, and Charles Burtch, a church sexton.

For a time the venture appears to have been successful. A consummate marketer, Burtch launched a stream of publicity schemes, including a weeklong fifth-anniversary party for the pharmacy to which villagers received fancy printed invitations. A series of mortgages in ensuing years, however, suggests that the financial picture was not altogether healthy; the building was lost to bank foreclosure at the onset of the Great Depression in 1930. By the time James Merrill and David Jackson purchased the Burtch Block in 1956, the second and third floor had been divided into two apartments each, probably in the late 1940s or early 1950s by the building’s then absentee owner, Stanley Jerome Hoxie, an artist and illustrator from nearby Mystic.

*James Ingram Merrill (1926–95)*

Born in New York City, James Merrill—known to almost everyone as Jimmy—was brought up primarily in Manhattan and Southampton, New York amid great economic privilege as the son of Hellen (Ingram) Merrill and Charles Edward Merrill, co-founder (1915) of the Merrill Lynch & Co. brokerage firm. Like his two step siblings, Jimmy was wealthy from childhood owing to an unbreakable trust established by Charles when his son was five. All three of the financier’s offspring used their family privilege as springboard to lives of notable

<sup>1</sup> The address at the time of construction was 101–103 Water Street.

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accomplishment in literature, education and philanthropy. Jimmy Merrill attended the Lawrenceville School in Princeton, New Jersey and graduated *summa cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in comparative literature from Amherst College in 1947, after a leave of absence to serve a two-year stint in the U.S. Army during World War II. At college he studied classical languages and tutored in the work of poets W.H. Auden and Wallace Stevens with the Greek writer and teacher Kimon Friar. His years in Amherst also coincided with the annual residency of another influence, Robert Frost. Merrill's great inspiration, and subject of his undergraduate thesis, however, was Marcel Proust, whose themes of memory, love, mortality, lost childhood and the inescapable passage of time deeply resonated with the young writer—and would become constant echoes in his own work.

After a year teaching at Bard College in 1948, Merrill gravitated back to New York, then traveled in Europe during an extended period of self-exploration that he later chronicled in *A Different Person: A Memoir* (1993). During these somewhat rudderless wanderings, the congenial Merrill had filled his engagement calendar with an endless stream of opera performances, art openings and dinners. In his memoir the poet recalled how ready he was to settle into the cozy rhythms of Stonington after his first trade book, *First Poems* appeared in 1951. The town's apparent serenity and sleepy pace offered a welcome counterpoint to his frenetic social life, and he knew that he wanted to concentrate on his writing. "It was time," Jimmy recalled, "to get to work."

Beginning in 1954, Merrill and Jackson spent two inaugural summer seasons in Stonington: the first in a house soon to be rented by writer Truman Capote, and the second in one of the two third-floor apartments at 107 Water Street, then occupied by their friend Guitoo Knoop, a Russian sculptress. It was Knoop who had encouraged the pair to try out the Connecticut town. "You'll feel right at home—it's a tiny Mediterranean port full of beautiful young Portuguese fishermen," she assured the pair.<sup>2</sup>

After their second summer in town, Merrill and Jackson initially signed a ten-year lease for the top floor of 107 Water Street, but almost immediately decided to buy instead. A June 1956 entry in David's journal expresses his relief over Hoxie's acceptance of their bid: "It's ours tomorrow...[and we] can start dreaming up ways to improve it all."

Leaving tenants in place on the first and second floors, the pair took over the quarters above. As they painted the exterior (then a red-brown) and sketched out floor plans for the two apartments—one for guests, the other for themselves—the men impatiently awaited their architect's drawings for the attic, to be converted to a studio and music room with adjacent deck, which provided them privacy while simultaneously offering a birds-eye view of the goings-on below (Archival Images 2 and 3). Jackson noted their constant daydreaming over "a great black-and-white checkerboard floor, glass walls, and terrace garden with vines and miniature orange trees." The two inaugurated their rooftop deck with a party in August. "The poor building is like an ancient belle dame," wrote Jackson, "shaken to her bones with rejuvenation."

The age and eccentricities of the slightly dog-eared Burtch Block especially appealed to Jimmy, who never had a taste for grandeur despite his wealth. He loved the idea

<sup>2</sup> James Merrill, *A Different Person: A Memoir*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 102.

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of living free from distractions on the building's top floor. During their first year on Water Street, Merrill and Jackson didn't even hook up a telephone. Both men—David also wrote—settled into an informal routine working on their manuscripts, followed by daily walks to the post office or trips by skiff to a local sandbar for swimming and picnics. In *A Different Person* Merrill related how Jackson worked at the kitchen table while he wrote on the dining-room sideboard in the corner tower they had “painted flame red, perhaps to placate the powers that one day, such was our delight in the old wooden building, might set it ablaze.” (Whenever they left home, the men shut their manuscripts in the refrigerator.)<sup>3</sup>

Despite Jimmy's anticipation of quiet, it was nearly impossible to resist his orbit. Now permanently installed, Merrill and Jackson began to collect local friends, and overnight guests seemed to flow in and out of 107 Water Street with abandon. Jackson remarked with pleasure on the arrival of Truman Capote and his companion, novelist Jack Dumphrey, in Stonington for the 1956 summer season (“Truman has been this summer's treat,” he crowed.) Much of Jimmy and David's local social life centered on bridge games, suppers and gossip shared with Eleanor Perényi, author and magazine editor, and her mother, novelist Grace Zaring Stone. David referred to their gatherings as “The Surly Temple.” (Jimmy was the cook, trading his recipes by mail with Alice B. Toklas.) Writer Stephen Vincent Benét, another resident of Stonington, was also drawn into Merrill's irresistible magnetic field. Among other frequent visitors were writers Alison Lurie and Elizabeth Bishop, photographer Rollie McKenna, composer John Cage, classical pianist George Copeland and dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. According to Lurie, novelist Mary McCarthy and her husband James West spent their honeymoon in one of the second-floor flats in 1961. When Grace Stone got too old to climb the building's narrow staircase, Jimmy installed an elevator for her.

The apartment's boutique-like décor charmed everyone. Friends contributed artworks, and the two men amplified their eclectic furnishings with talismans and curiosities—Persian miniatures, a Jade dragon from China, a Javanese puppet head, a Meissen plate—collected during their travels. A harpsichord purchased in Rome joined a brass bed, an Eames chair, a wicker settee (painted orchid), and a piano hoisted by crane into the studio. Tucked into his corner study behind his secret bookcase door, Jimmy somehow found the seclusion he needed to work. His first collection to follow *First Poems* was *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace and Other Poems*, published in 1959.

By that time Merrill was gaining a steady popular following as well as critical ground. His poems—elegant, polished and technically proficient—earned comparisons to those of William Butler Yeats; critics also drew frequent parallels to W. H. Auden, William Blake and Dante. Although Merrill's earlier verse, built on sustained couplets and triplets, was sometimes criticized as overly formalistic, reviewers appreciated his verbal dexterity and witty word play. His later poems, which tended to be freer, were spun through with personal musings and fragments of memory that endowed them with a particular immediacy and poignancy. Resisting “message” poetry, Merrill always insisted that he simply waited for the words to

<sup>3</sup> David Jackson wrote prolifically, but his five novels were never published. A story, “Pigeon Vole,” was privately printed in 1961. Two book reviews were published in *The New York Review of Books* (1976), and a short story, “The English Gardens,” appeared in *Prize Stories 1962: The O. Henry Awards*. Jackson also wrote music lyrics and sketched and painted.

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come to him: "What the poem ended up saying," he explained to a newspaper editor in 1986, "was my reward and surprise" (*The Hartford Courant*, March 23, 1986).

Jimmy's first major critical breakthrough came with *Nights and Days*, which gained him the National Book Award in Poetry in 1966. Amherst awarded the writer an honorary degree in 1968. By the 1970s Merrill's poems were regularly appearing on the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine, and the writer was an increasingly frequent subject of profiles and reviews in the popular and academic press alike. Rapidly accruing accolades, he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1971 and won Yale's Bollingen Prize for *Braving the Elements* the following year. In 1976 a new collection, *Divine Comedies*, earned Merrill another literary plum in the form of the Pulitzer Prize. "The Book of Ephraim," a 100-page semi-narrative verse included in *Divine Comedies*, fostered new admiration for Merrill's range. Reviewing the collection in *The New Republic* (Nov. 20, 1976), Harold Bloom said that its eight shorter poems surpassed virtually all of the poet's previous verse. Yet as good as they were, he asserted, the book's "apocalypse" ("a lesser word won't do") was the Ephraim epic, an "occult splendor" that Bloom believed rivaled Yeats's *A Vision*.

The "occult" in "splendor" referred to the curious foundation for "Ephraim," which Merrill based on conversations that he and Jackson (and sometimes their friends) were having with spirit figures via ongoing sessions with their ouija board. The two had begun experimenting with the parlor game during their first Stonington summer as a way to pass time before they had settled into a regular social life. Yet, according to Jimmy, the board soon begged the question of what he could learn by using it as a legitimate poetic device that might lead him on increasingly fantastical forays into an alternate universe via his subconscious. (A poet, Merrill suggested, looks for material wherever it comes from, no matter how apparently absurd.)

Cast as a Greek Jew from the court of Roman emperor Tiberius, the character of Ephraim gave Merrill entrée to stream of other "visitors" from across the ages that would ultimately provide material for his epic poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The extraordinary cast of characters peopling this sprawling metaphysical trilogy ranged from Mother Nature to Maria Callas and Montezuma, whose appearances might be interspersed with the likes of Nefertiti and Pythagoras; still other figures (a few demonic) were fictional. To be sure, the ouija board also channeled the words of literary figures—Auden, Yeats, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Andrew Marvel and Gertrude Stein among the many. (Nabokov was rebuffed, unable to get a word in edgewise; Edna St. Vincent Millay appeared by mistake; and Wallace Stevens quoted a phrase from Merrill, much to Jimmy's delight.)

After the publication of *Divine Comedies* in 1976, Merrill kept at the ouija board. "The Book of Ephraim" was followed in 1978 by *Mirabell: Books of Number* (winner of a second National Book Award) and *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980). Each volume involved the input of a progressively higher order of spirits, who advised, admonished, cajoled and otherwise conversed with their communicants as Merrill and Jackson busily transcribed their words for later use by the poet.

It is easy to identify the influence of his Stonington residence on Merrill's work in the writer's recurring references to his rooms and their contents in these and other works, including a 1962 collection eponymously entitled *Water Street*. The very first pages of "The

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Life of Ephraim” describe the tin-domed dining room and milk-glass table where the men sat for hours moving a willowware teacup over their ouija board. Merrill often referenced the room’s flame-red color, layering its deeper symbolism under everyday events and concerns. In “Ephraim” it was “... a witty/Shade, now watermelon, now sunburn.” As metaphor for underlying themes (anxiety, destruction, change, the everyday peril of fire), the color reappears in the flame and embers invoked in “Home Fires” (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995). “My house is made from wood so old, so dry/From years beneath the pilot-light blue sky,/A stranger’s idle glance could be the match/That sends us all to blazes.” After a meeting with an insurance agent, readers learn, Jimmy and David built the fire escape on the north side of the building.

Merrill opened *Mirabell* with a wry account of the petty vanity of dealing with the Wrong Wallpaper in his Stonington sitting room: a “fussy and dated” covering that he replaced with his fantastical pattern of clouds and bats. “Readers in small towns will know the world/Of interest rippling out from such a topic,/Know by their own case that “small town” is/Largely state of mind, a medium/Wherein suspended, microscopic fragments/—Boredom, malice, curiosity—/Catch a steadily more revealing light.” Later in the poem, readers learn that the room’s oriental carpet came from a Boston dealer, its gilded mirror was a castoff from a new neighbor and that its bat paper was commissioned from friend and designer Hubbell Pierce during a snowy evening of cocktails and soufflé. (Pierce, then an associate of Hinson & Company, manufacturer of fine wall coverings and fabrics, was so proud of the design that he issued a press release about his involvement.)

Jimmy’s inherent sense of domesticity resonated in the details of his poems as well as in their titles: “Home Fires,” “A Tenancy,” “A Room at the Heart of Things,” “Poets at Home,” “Domestic Architecture.” The writer returned repeatedly to images of interior spaces, intimate and sheltering, which he regarded as stanzas (Italian for “rooms”) in the greater storytelling of life. “I always loved the idea of a received space ... it’s never occurred to me to build my own house,” Merrill told J.D. McClatchy in a 1979 interview. “But I love to fit myself into existing rooms.”

In a posthumous tribute to his friend (*The New Yorker*, March 27, 1995), McClatchy described Jimmy’s preference for letting a room and its objects prompt the right words, rather than turning to the human aspect of his subject for inspiration. “What was in front of his eyes would reveal what was on his mind,” wrote McClatchy. Yet there was also a certain yin and yang to Jimmy’s relationship with his Stonington residence. Although the poet let his rooms inspire him, he also paid a painstaking attention to their appearance, sketching furniture layouts and noting the placement of accessories with a precision that belies the casual aspect of his living space. A visit to these rooms suggests that Merrill relished the shapes, silhouettes and colors of objects just as he relished the look and sound of words and phrasing.

In 1982 the writer’s three ouija-board works were published together with a new coda, *The Higher Keys*, as *The Changing Light at Sandover*, winner that year of the National Book Critics Circle Award. Some critics were baffled, some hailed the postmodern epic as Jimmy’s masterwork and still others saw it as prelude to his best work. There were indeed more honors to come, including the Connecticut Arts Award for Excellence in 1983. In 1986 Yale University awarded Merrill his second honorary degree. The same year he was also chosen as

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Connecticut’s first Poet Laureate from a field of dozens of worthy candidates, including the two semi-finalists, Robert Penn Warren of Fairfield and William Meredith of Uncasville. Despite Merrill’s frequent travels and winter escapes to Athens, Greece and Key West, Florida, the New York native had earned his place as the state’s permanent literary son. In response to the honor, Jimmy remarked simply, “I think of Connecticut as home.”

Two more collections by the poet followed in the 1980s: *Late Settings* (1985) and *The Inner Room* (1988), which critic Daniel Mendelsohn declared to be at a higher level than anything Merrill had produced to date (“A Poet of Love and Loss,” *The New York Times Book Review*, March 4, 2001). In 1988 and 1989 respectively, Merrill received the Library of Congress’s first Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry and the Medal of Honor for Literature from the National Arts Club.

In later years Jimmy’s relationship with David Jackson deteriorated, but even after Merrill took up with actor Peter Hooten, Jackson remained a part of his life. Merrill died in February 1995 while on a trip to Tucson, Arizona. He had continued to write until just days before suffering a fatal heart attack. By that time his work often quietly touched on the subject of AIDS, which had claimed the lives of several friends before taking his own.

Merrill’s bequest of 107 Water Street to the Stonington Village Improvement Association left the organization with an exceptionally rich resource, enhanced by the formal gift (1999) of the Merrill apartment contents from their inheritor, J.D. McClatchy. Located in the Stonington Village National Register Historic District (1978), the building itself is an essential part of the historic borough streetscape, while the Merrill rooms survive as an important reflection of the life Merrill lived in Stonington. Since inaugurating the writers-in-residence program in 1995, the SVIA has invited some thirty scholars to reside in the house and enjoy the freedom to use the rooms as they please. With this ongoing philanthropic endeavor, the association continues to nurture and protect an exceptionally significant cultural landmark, and with it, the legacy of a brilliant lyric poet who ranks among the country’s great 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary figures in America.

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Special Collections:

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut  
James Ingram Merrill Papers  
*Manuscripts, clippings, miscellaneous papers and transcripts*

Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis Missouri  
James Ingram Merrill Papers  
*Journals, manuscripts, transcripts, clippings, receipts, photographs*

David Jackson Papers  
*Journals, photographs, receipts*

Stonington Historical Society  
*Vertical research files and archival photograph collections*  
*Stonington Village Improvement Society records*

Public Records:

Town of Stonington, Connecticut  
Land and Tax Records

Town of Groton, Connecticut  
Probate Records



Water Street, looking North, Stonington, Conn.

**Archival Image 1: Water Street and James Merrill House, c. 1910, Stonington Historical Society**



**Archival Image 2: David Jackson and James Merrill at 107 Water Street, 1961 (Rollie McKenna), Stonington Historical Society**



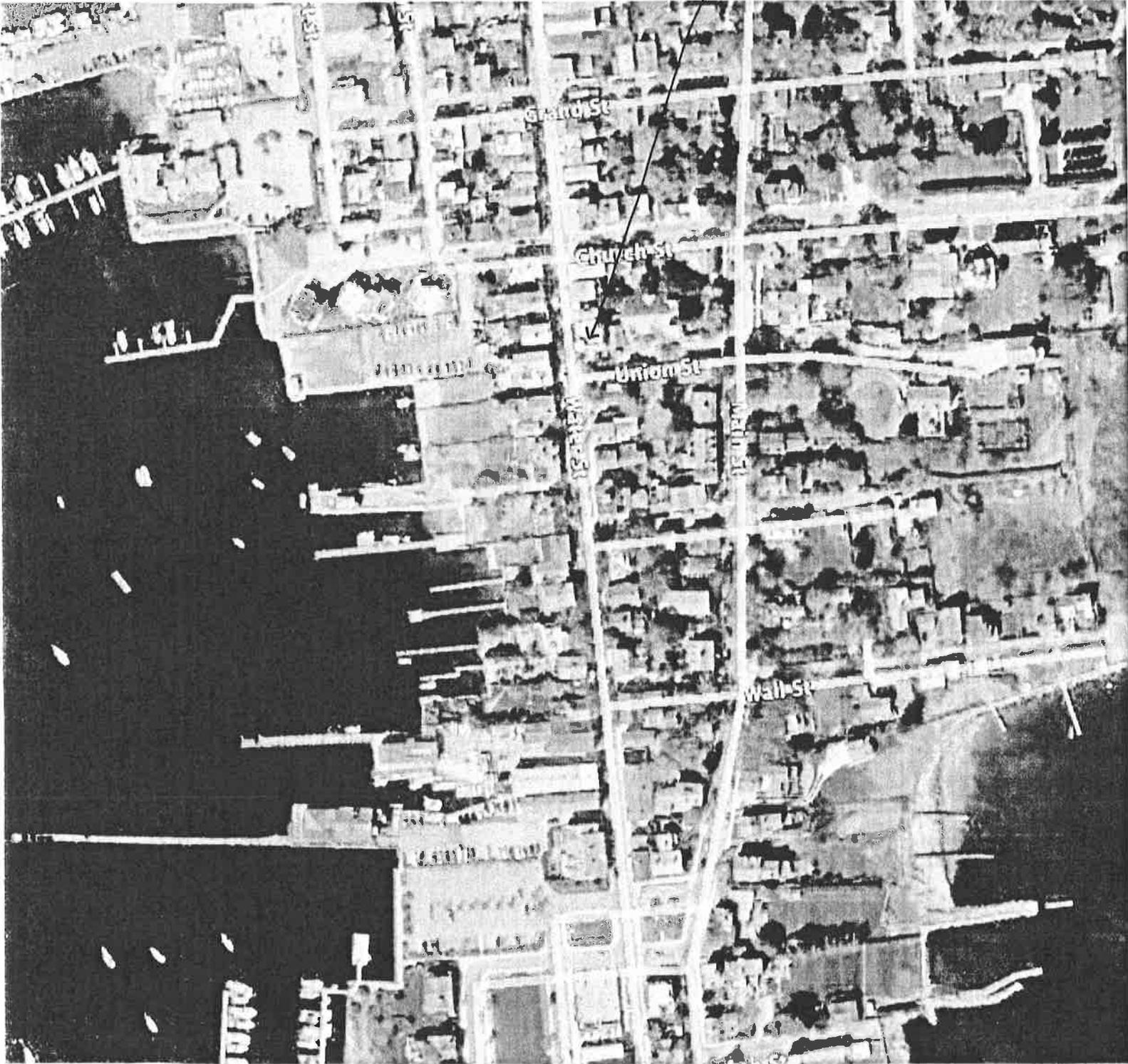
Archival Image 3: Merrill House with rooftop addition and deck, looking west



James Merrill House, Stonington, New London County, CT  
geographic coordinates

Map 1

James Merrill House



James Merrill House, Stonington, New London County, CT





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