

The Stevens House



1955



1992

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In June of 1949 a young couple, Ann Marie Riley and Edward Richard Stevens, were married in Woodcrest, Delaware. The couple with the help from family built a three-room one-story house on land owned by Edward's parents Wilmer and Blanche Stevens in Stanton, Delaware (See Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Original Home built by Edward and Ann Marie Stevens, 1949 (All photographs are from the collection of Edward and Ann Marie Stevens)

On January 31, 1952 they purchased a plot of land just outside of Stanton, in the subdivision of Stanton Crest, where they hoped to build a house. The Stevens acted as the general contractors for the building and with the help of family and friends did all of the construction work except for the excavation, masonry and plumbing. They moved into their new house in August of 1955 and still live there today.

This house is more than just a house to me, Edward and Ann Marie are my parents and my sister Mary Kay and I grew up in that house.

This paper is the story of the house and more importantly what it was like to build a house in 1954. I will attempt, through the documents my parents saved and through the oral history of my family, to tell the story of the Stevens House in Stanton Crest.

The Builders

Ann Marie Stevens, who worked for the E.I. duPont De Nemours Company in the clerical department, managed the job. She was responsible for the ordering of material, the scheduling of events and for the paying of the bills. Only twenty-four at the time she readily admits that at the beginning of the project she had no idea of what she was doing.

Edward R. "Eddie" Stevens worked as a welder in the Body Shop at the General Motors Assembly plant in Newport. Edward had served in the Navy as a Corpsman during World War II. He had received some construction experience in high school and from his father.

Wilmer H. "Pete" Stevens was Eddie's father and worked as an independent painting contractor in the Wilmington area. Pete grew up in Maryland where he learned the building and painting trades.

William "Billy" Stevens was Eddie's brother who worked with his father in the painting business. He too had some construction experience from school and from his father.

Joseph R. "Joe" Riley, Jr. was Ann Marie's brother and he worked in the building maintenance department of the Wilmington News Journal.

George Price was a friend of the Stevens and he worked as a professional carpenter. George worked on the house at a flat rate of \$2.00 per hour.

Together this group had already built Eddie and Ann Marie's first house. In the future they would also build houses for Pete and his wife and for Billy and his wife and three children.

Since all the men worked during the day construction was limited to weekends and evenings during the summer.

The plumbing was subcontracted out to Ed Sharkey, a licensed plumber who was also a friend of Eddie's. The masonry work was done by R.S. Griest, a local masonry contractor. The plastering was done by George Tweed. Harold Cox and Paul Timco did the grading of the site and the laying of the asphalt driveway.

The Site

In November of 1945, Charles F. and Edith H. Wahl attained the

deed to land conveyed to them by Clarence T. Crossan.¹ The Wahls divided this land into thirty three lots which became the subdivision of Stanton Crest. The land, formerly farmland, bounded the Red Clay Creek just outside of Stanton in Christiana Hundred, New Castle County Delaware.

Construction of houses in Stanton Crest began in 1946² and in January 1949 George N. and Virginia M. Price purchased Lot 16 (see Fig 2.) from the Wahls for the price of \$600.00.



Fig 2. Lot 16 Stanton Crest, 1954

The Prices did not build on the lot and on January 31, 1952 Eddie and Ann Marie Stevens bought the lot for \$750.00.³

¹Deed Record Q, Vol. 45, Page 289 : Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Wilmington DE

²Chase, 128

³Deed Record O, Vol. 51, Page 456: Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Wilmington DE

In the deed Lot 16 is designated as follows⁴: "Beginning at a point in the easterly side of Harbeson Place (at 50 feet wide), a corner for this lot and lot 15, and distant 912.12 feet measured in a Southerly direction along the said easterly side of Harbeson Place, the various courses thereof, from the point of tangency of a 20 foot radius intersection curve tangent also to the southerly side of the Wilmington and Christiana Turnpike; thence from the said point of beginning by Lot 15, S.61E 11' 14" E., 183.01 feet to a point in the easterly boundary of Stanton Crest; thence thereby S. 18E 58' W., 55.82 feet to a point; thence by Lot 17, N 61E 11' 14" W., 192.56 feet to a point in the aforementioned easterly side of Harbeson Place; thence thereby N 28E 48' 46" E., 55.00 feet to the place of beginning." (See Appendix A for the site plan and a map showing the location of Stanton Crest).

Once the Stevens purchased Lot 16 they began searching for house plans. There were two essential constraints imposed on their selection process. The first was the fact that the lot was only fifty-five feet wide, which limited the possibilities. The second was that by the terms of the deed all housing plans had to be submitted to the Mr. Wahl for his approval and that Mr. Wahl would not approve any house that was not either two stories or one story with a dormer.

The Stevens searched through house plan catalogs and finally decided on the **Elberton** from the Standard Homes Company, 81948. Mr. Wahl approved of this plan and construction began August 1954.

In addition to the deed restriction requiring approval from Mr. Wahl, the deed also prohibited minorities saying in article 1, "At no time shall the land in said tract, or any part thereof, or any building erected thereon, be sold, leased, conveyed to, or occupied by anyone not of the Caucasian Race. This prohibition, however, is not intended to exclude a domestic servant or other person while employed in or about the premises by the owner of occupant of any land included in the same tract."⁵

This type of deed restrictions was common during this period of

⁴Ibid.

⁵Deed Record O, Vol. 51, Page 456: Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Wilmington DE

time and it was thought of as a legitimate device to ensure that the value of the property remained high.⁶

The House

The style of the Elberton is not one of the major styles in New Castle County and is a hybrid. The two striking details of the house are the steepness of the roof, which gives the house a feeling of height and the ornate front entryway.

The house contains two stories with a basement, a dining room, living room, kitchen, three bedrooms and one and a half bathrooms. There is a walk in closet off the front entryway and a pantry off the kitchen. The basement houses the heater, hot water heater and the washer and drier and Eddie's workshop. The original house had a porch with access from the living room. This porch has since been converted to a permanent den. The dimensions are 26' by 26' and the house is a combination masonry and frame. The masonry sections of the house are composed of block with a brick facing in a running bond pattern. (See Appendix B for floor plans)

The only deviation the Stevens made from the original plans was the elimination of a hall which was intended to run off the front entryway and would limit access to the living room on the right to a single door. The Stevens decided to eliminate this hall, which made the living room completely open, and the primary point of view to anyone entering the house.

Once Eddie and Ann Marie picked out the plan of the house they calculated the cost of the construction to be approximately \$12,000.

They applied for and received a construction mortgage for \$8,000 at 6% interest on July 2, 1954 from the Delaware Mortgage Company. This mortgage was distributed in stages and proof of progress in the construction process was required before the next stage of money was released.

Construction Details⁷

⁶See Chase pp74-75 for a discussion of deed restrictions

⁷All construction details come from a Federal Housing Administration Description of Materials Form, FHA

The following section will describe the materials and techniques used during the construction phase. It is broken down into general construction categories.

Excavation and Foundations

In early August of 1954 excavation for the project began. (See Figure 3.) The basement was excavated to a depth of five and one half feet below the natural grade and the soil was used on site. The wall footings are concrete mixed in the ratio one part Portland cement to two and a half parts sand to five parts gravel and are 20" x 10". The pier footing size is 24" x 24" with a thickness of 15".

The footing drains are 4" drain tile. The exterior foundation wall below grade is block, 8" thick and above grade brick and block 8" thick. The interior foundation wall is block. The columns are 12" x 12" brick and the piers are 8" x 8" brick. There is one spanning girder which is an 8" steel I-beam which is supported by 6" diameter steel columns on 8" x 8" brick piers. The foundation wall was waterproofed with pitch on the exterior. All windows are steel sash. The chimney is constructed of brick with cast iron clean out doors and an ash pit clean out in the basement. The flue lining size is 13" x 13". The size of the fireplace opening is 2' 10" x 2' 6". The fireplace is lined with firebrick has brick facings, a tile hearth, and a maple mantel



Fig 3. Start of excavation. Eddie and Pete Stevens setting

corner.

Exterior Walls

The exterior walls of the house up to the second floor in the front and back are solid masonry with a facing material of CSB 23 full range bricks and a backing material of 4" concrete blocks. The lintels are steel. The non-masonry walls are painted with three coats of paint. There is no insulation in the masonry portion of the walls and the insulation in the frame portions consists of a wrapping of treated paper. The interior surfaces of the walls are furred with 1" x 2" pine spaced 16" on center (see Figures 4 and 5 for views of the masonry and framing).



Fig 4: Front view of masonry and framing



Fig 5: Rear view of masonry and framing

Floor Framing and Floors

The floor framing consists of 2" x 10" fir (grade 2) joists attached by joist hangers with 1" x 3" bridging. The joists are spaced 16" on center. The rafter plates are attached with 8" x 3/4" bolts. The subfloor consists of tongue and groove pine (grade 2) laid at right angles to the joists. The finished floor in the hall, dining room, living room and the three bedrooms is 7/8" x 2 1/4" oak (2 common) finished with shellac.

Framing

All the partition framing is done with fir (grade 2). The studs are 2" x 4" set at 16" on center. The bridging in the bearing partitions are 1" x 3". The sole, cap and door lintels are 2" x 4".

The ceiling framing is done with 2" x 6" fir (grade 2) and the rafters are set at 16" on center. The ceiling is insulated with 3" of rock wool laid between the floor joists in the attic.

The roofing is sheathed in straight edge 1" x 6" fir. The shingles are 210 pound asphalt shingles with 15 pound asphalt saturated felt underlay. The flashing is metal. (See Figures 6 and 7 for views of the roof sheathing) In Figures 6 and 7 notice that the portion of the masonry that would eventually be hidden by the porch roof has been done in block. It is common in masonry to do any portion of the finished wall that will not be visible in the less expensive material.



Fig. 6: View of roof sheathing



Fig 7: Rear view showing masonry and framing

Other Details

The gutters and down spouts are corrugated aluminum terminating in concrete splash blocks.

The interior walls of the house are finished with 1/2" gypsum

covered with three coats of plaster each 7/8" thick with the top finish coat being white. The walls in each of the rooms were then painted.

The interior doors are flush mounted 1 1/2" birch with 1/2" fir door jambs and were finished with stain and varnish.

The windows are double hung fir with metal flashing, copper interlock weather-stripping and caulking.

The main entrance has a 1 3/4" flush solid birch door with aluminum flashing and the other entrances have 1 3/4" birch panel doors.

The shutters are mill made solid fir and are fixed and used only for ornamentation.

The kitchen has twenty one linear feet of cabinets which were mill made and have a depth of 2.5'. The cabinets have been stained and varnished. The kitchen counter top was linoleum with a linoleum back splash and stainless steel edging. The counter top was changed in approximately 1983 to a solid particle board with birch veneer top and a rounded edge. The original linoleum backsplash and tile on the lower half of the walls were changed to decorative ceramic tile. At this time the original ceramic sink was replaced by a stainless steel sink.

The main stairs and the basement stairs are constructed with yellow pine with all but the basement treads being 5/4" and the rest of the treads and risers being 3/4". The main stairs are finished with 7/8" x 2 1/4" oak like the floors.

The house originally had a cesspool located in the front yard but in 1957 the County sewer line came to Stanton Crest and the house was connected to the county sewer line. The sewer pipes are cast iron and the water supply pipes are copper tubing.

The house was originally heated by a oil furnace with a 275 gallon fuel storage tank in the basement. This heater was replaced in 1989 by a gas heater. At the same time the original electric hot water heater was replaced by a gas hot water heater.

The electrical wiring is overhead with a fuse box and the service contains four circuits. There are forty outlets and a special purpose outlet for the range in the kitchen. There are a total of thirteen lighting fixtures distributed throughout the house.

The original porch was constructed on concrete footings with a brick and block foundation. The ceiling is tongue and grooved beaded board and the roof uses the same shingles as the main house.

The house had 3" thick concrete walkways from the front landing to the street (later removed) and the original driveway was 4" thick concrete on top of a 4" gravel fill. The driveway has since been changed to asphalt and the driveway was extended twenty feet in 1969 to form a parking pad.

See Appendix B for a break down of construction costs.

Anecdotal Stories About the Construction

This section will recount some of the oral history that I grew up hearing as well as some recent remembrances from my parents. I was aware at an early age that my father had built our house and I was also aware that this was not a common occurrence. I remember many times at family gatherings listening to my father and my uncles and grandfather telling stories about how they built the house.

Generally these stories recounted the things that were humorous but some of them can give one a picture of what is what like building the house.

The most famous incident that is still recounted was when Hurricane Hazel hit on October 16, 1954.

Hazel was one of the worst Atlantic hurricanes of the 20th century and had vortex winds in excess of 300 kph and had a zone of destruction greater than 200 kilometers.⁸ Hazel had such powerful winds that when it hit the island of Haiti it sucked up debris such as green coconuts which were then deposited on the beaches of North Carolina, a distance of 1500 kilometers.⁹ Hazel was responsible for property damage in excess of \$251 million and killed 95 people in the United States.¹⁰

On October 15 the *Wilmington Morning News* predicted that the storm would hit the Delmarva Peninsula with winds reaching 50-60 mph on

⁸D.V. Nalivkin, *Hurricanes, Storms and Tornadoes*, 1983 A.A. Balkema, Rotterdam pg. 14-15.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid. p98.

Saturday morning October 16. On Saturday the masonry contractor, R.S. Griest showed up at the job site and proceeded to finish the second story portion of the wall on the kitchen side of the house. He had laid the first story and the wall on the opposite side of the house on Thursday and was not concerned with the possibility of high winds. His crew finished by afternoon and left the site. The winds started to rise and Eddie and Pete noticed that the new portion of the wall was swaying in the wind. The other wall seemed firm so they attempted to firm the new wall by attaching braces to the roof joists. As they were doing this the next-door neighbor, Mr. Joseph McDermott, came out and moved his car, which was parked, in the driveway. It was a good thing he did for the wall blew over not long after. The wall fell in such a way that the McDermott's car would have been crushed and in fact it fell in such a way that it looked as if the masons had laid the bricks on the driveway. (See Figure 8 for a view of the damage)



Fig 8: Damage caused by Hurricane Hazel, October 16, 1954

The other favorite story was how the men would show up to work during the warm weather and give Mrs. Barlow, the neighbor on the left side, wolf whistles whenever she came out of the house. Of course this was much to the horror of Ann Marie who knew she would have to live next door to the Barlows.

The work crew also was known to drink some beer and to this day Ann Marie swears that the reason the cellar gets wet during the rain

is all the beer cans that were used for fill before the final grading of the lot.

For the most part the construction went very smoothly, except of course for Hurricane Hazel, but the project did get halted when a building inspector said that the main ridge beam in the roof needed to be a double thickness instead of the single thickness the plans called for. The new beam would not go in cleanly so Pete figured out where the least obvious place was and cut the beam there. Then they installed the new beam in two pieces and the inspector approved the work.

The men worked on the house every chance they got, Eddie was there every night after work and he was joined by his father and brother whenever possible. During the winter months they would take one long log and place it's end in the fireplace and just keep pushing it in as it burned down. Eddie recalls that a lot of sloe gin was drunk in an effort to keep warm. On Saturdays they were out at daybreak but on Sunday they waited until 9 a.m. in deference to the neighbors.

Working on the house in this fashion they finished and Ann Marie and Eddie moved into their new house on July 21, 1955. It took less than one year to build the house from the excavation to the final grading of the lot.

Changes Since 1955

This section will deal with the changes made to the Stevens House from when Ann Marie and Eddie Stevens moved in up to the present.

There have not been many changes in the physical structure of the house except for the conversion of the porch to a permanent room. The porch started out simply as a screened in side porch. In 1981, the porch was converted to a three season room by taking off the screen and replacing it with thermal storm windows and screen. In 1991, the room was converted to a den by insulating the walls and ceiling and connecting the room to the heating system.

The original access to the attic was via a hatch in the second floor linen closet. In the mid 1960's a disappearing staircase was installed in the ceiling of the second floor hallway, which enabled the family to better utilize the attic as a storage space.

In 1969 the driveway was extended approximately twenty feet to create a parking pad and basketball court. A storage barn was erected at the end of this new space.

When the heating system was changed to gas in 1989 a partition wall was removed in the basement in order to remove the oil storage tank, which expanded Eddie's workshop by approximately seventy square feet.

During the late 1980's Eddie built an elaborate vanity and medicine chest for the bathroom on the second floor. This in turn was replaced in October 1997 by a free standing pedestal lavatory, new toilets, and a wall mounted medicine cabinet. At this time the end of the tub was enclosed with a wall constructed of glass blocks.

Also at this time the "Powder Room", the downstairs half bath was renovated. This renovation consisted of replacement of the toilet unit and the installation of a pedestal style lavatory.

In the mid 1970's vinyl clad aluminum siding with rigid foam insulation was installed on the exterior exposed wood.

The most recent changes to the house are not actual physical changes but more esthetic ones. Eddie and Ann Marie take great pride in their living room and dining room and have worked hard at decorating them.

The living room which is the first room one sees on entering from the front entry way is paneled in beaded knotty pine on the interior walls. The fireplace with it's tile hearth and heavy mantel, the built in corner bookcases and the window treatments emphasize the care the house receives. (See Figure 9).



Fig 9: Living Room 1992

Entry to the dining room is through a large archway from the living room so that the dining room is also visible from the front entry. Eddie repainted the dining room and stenciled an elaborate pattern on the top edge of the walls. He also created boxes for the top of the windows which he decorated to match the painting of the walls. He named the dining room the "Wedgwood Room" since the color scheme and pattern matches Wedgwood china. (See Figure 10)



Fig 10: Dining Room 1992

The real change in the Stevens House was the way the

landscaping changed. Pictures of the back yard in the early 60's show very little in the way of trees or bushes. After Eddie retired from General Motors in 1978 gardening became one of his passions and today the landscaping shows the care he lavishes on the gardens and lawn. His pride and joy is his Japanese garden complete with Koi fish that is tucked into the corner by the den and dining room. Every year sees some change in the plan and every year the results are spectacular.

Of course the passage of 37 years gives the trees time to grow and the maples and oaks that were mere saplings when planted are now fully grown and the landscape that is presented now is completely different than that of 1955. (See Figure 11 and 12)

As time has gone by it is hard to remember all the variations of gardens and trees that made up the landscape. In 1955 the Ann Marie and Eddie purchased two White Birch trees and one azalea none of which survive today.



Fig. 11: Current front view

Fig. 12: Current rear view

During the late 1950's the development of Glenville was started which backs up to Harbeson Place. Up to that time Harbeson Place terminated in a cul-de-sac which meant that there was no through traffic. The developers of Glenville approached the residents of Stanton Crest and requested that the cul de sac be removed and that Harbeson Place be continued in order to give access to the new development. The residents agreed to the request and now Harbeson Place is one of the two access roads for Glenville.

In comparison to the rest of Stanton Crest the Stevens House

has remained very stable. The overwhelming majority of houses on Harbeson Place have had major renovations over the years. The subdivision has three fewer houses than in 1955 as they were moved when Route 4 was enlarged through Stanton in the mid 60's.

Financial Details

The last section deals with some of the financial aspects of house building in the 1950's .

The fee for the building permit which was issued in August 1954 was \$19.50. This was for a brick dwelling with a valuation of \$12,000.

When Eddie and Ann Marie started construction they estimated that it would cost \$12,000 to build their house. When the project was completed the final cost came to \$13,234.61 in material and labor.

The Stevens received a fifteen year mortgage from the Equitable Security Trust Company (now the Bank of Delaware) for \$8,000 at 5% interest. This mortgage paid off the original building mortgage secured from the Delaware Mortgage Company. The monthly installments for the new mortgage came to \$63.28. The mortgage was paid off in July of 1970.

The County tax for the fiscal year July 1, 1956 to June 30, 1957 (the first full year the Stevens lived in their house) was based on a rate of \$0.36/\$100 of assessed value. The house and land was valued at \$9400 so the County tax was \$33.84 plus an additional \$6.50 for the street lights on Harbeson Place.

The Newport School tax for the same fiscal year was based on a rate of \$0.27/\$100 of assessed value for a total of \$25.38. The Conrad School tax was based on a rate of \$0.08/\$100 of assessed value for a total of \$7.52.

The tax structure of New Castle County changed at a rapid rate. In the next fiscal year (57-58) the taxes had increased to the following. The County tax was now \$43.65, the Newport School tax was \$39.48 and the Conrad School tax was \$10.34.

One of Eddie's favorite things to show new homeowners is the account ledger Ann Marie kept during the construction process. This ledger basically shows all the individual payments that were paid out and in reading it one sees very clearly that the price of building had increased tremendously over the past thirty seven

years.

Conclusion

Anyone who has ever worked in construction can imagine the feeling of satisfaction that Ann Marie and Eddie feel when they come into their house. They did not feel that they were doing anything special in doing the majority of the construction themselves. Perhaps it was a simpler time in 1954 and there was not as much pressure on people to accomplish everything quickly and this may have made the task easier.

One of the negative aspects of modern construction, in my opinion, is the importance of speed. Because of this attitude of get the job done as quickly as possible we have lost the "art" of construction. Modern carpenters are very good at using miter saws, power nailers, engineered timbers and the rest of the technological advances now present but they have lost the old time ability to take raw wood and transform it into something. I wonder if a carpenter today could fashion blind mortise and tenon joints or the intricate dovetails of yesterday? It is important that these skills be passed on to today's generation.

I was fortunate to be able to grow up in the Stevens House and be able to help my father in some of the alterations that were made as I got older. I learned a lot about building from both my father and my grandfather and someday I hope to have the opportunity to pass on the information.

Bibliography

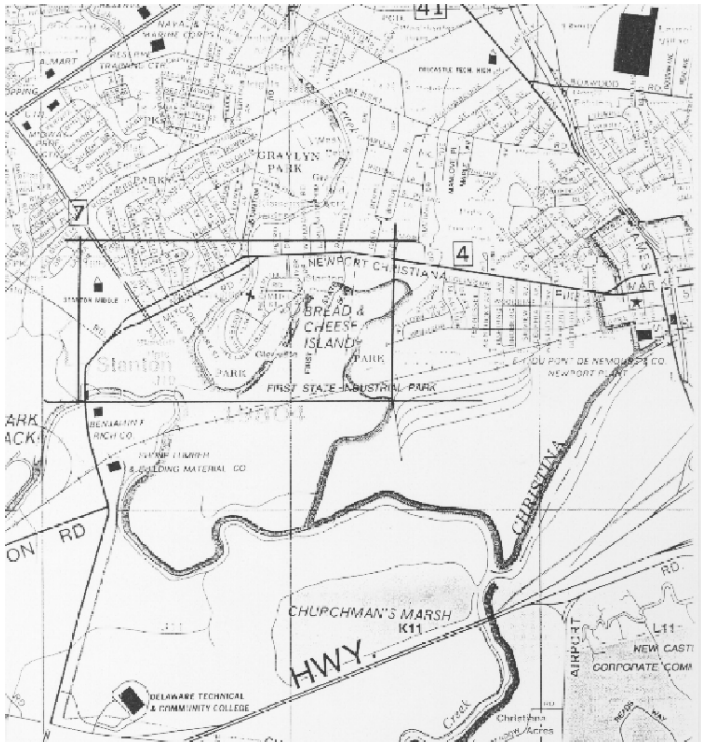
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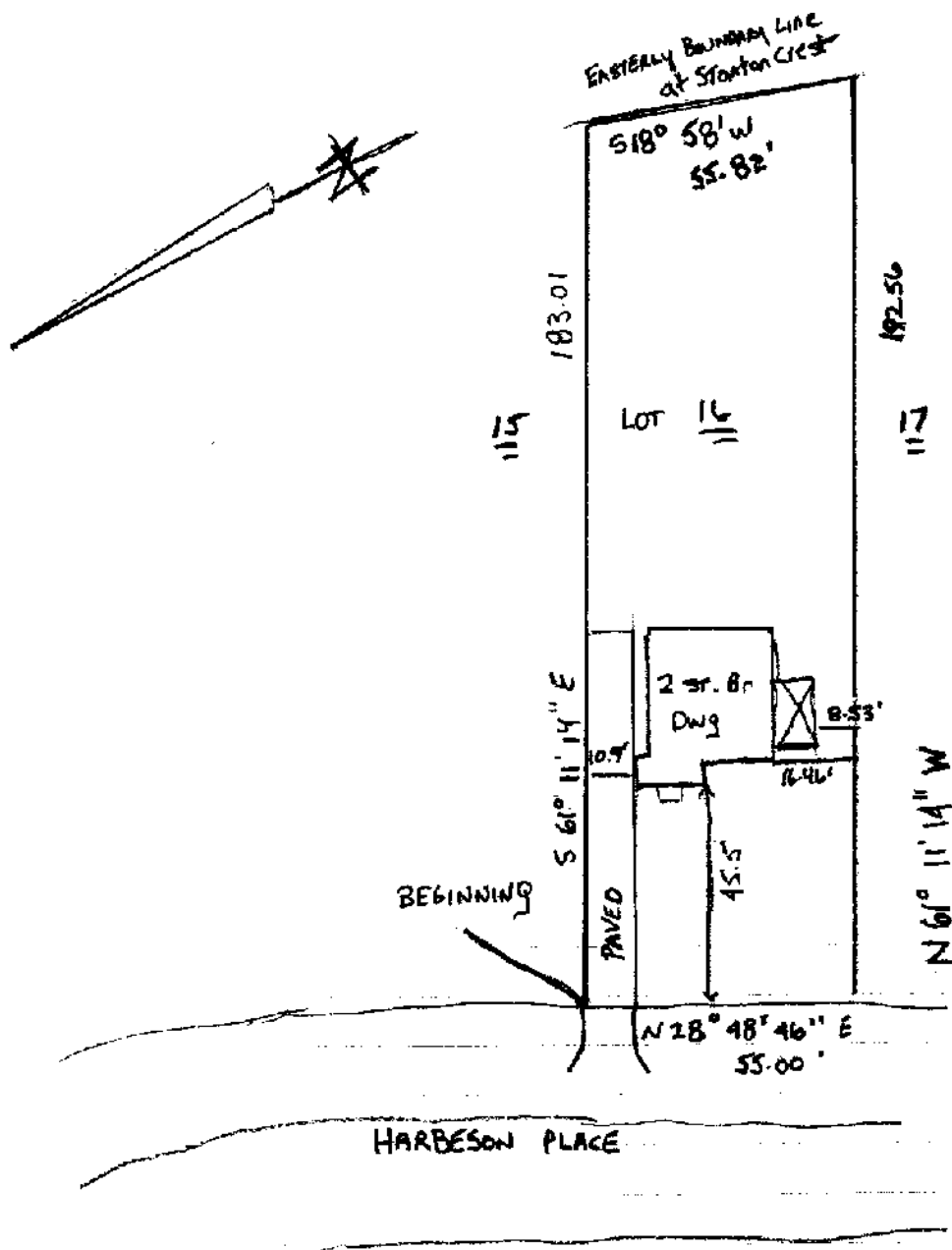
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Appendix A: Maps

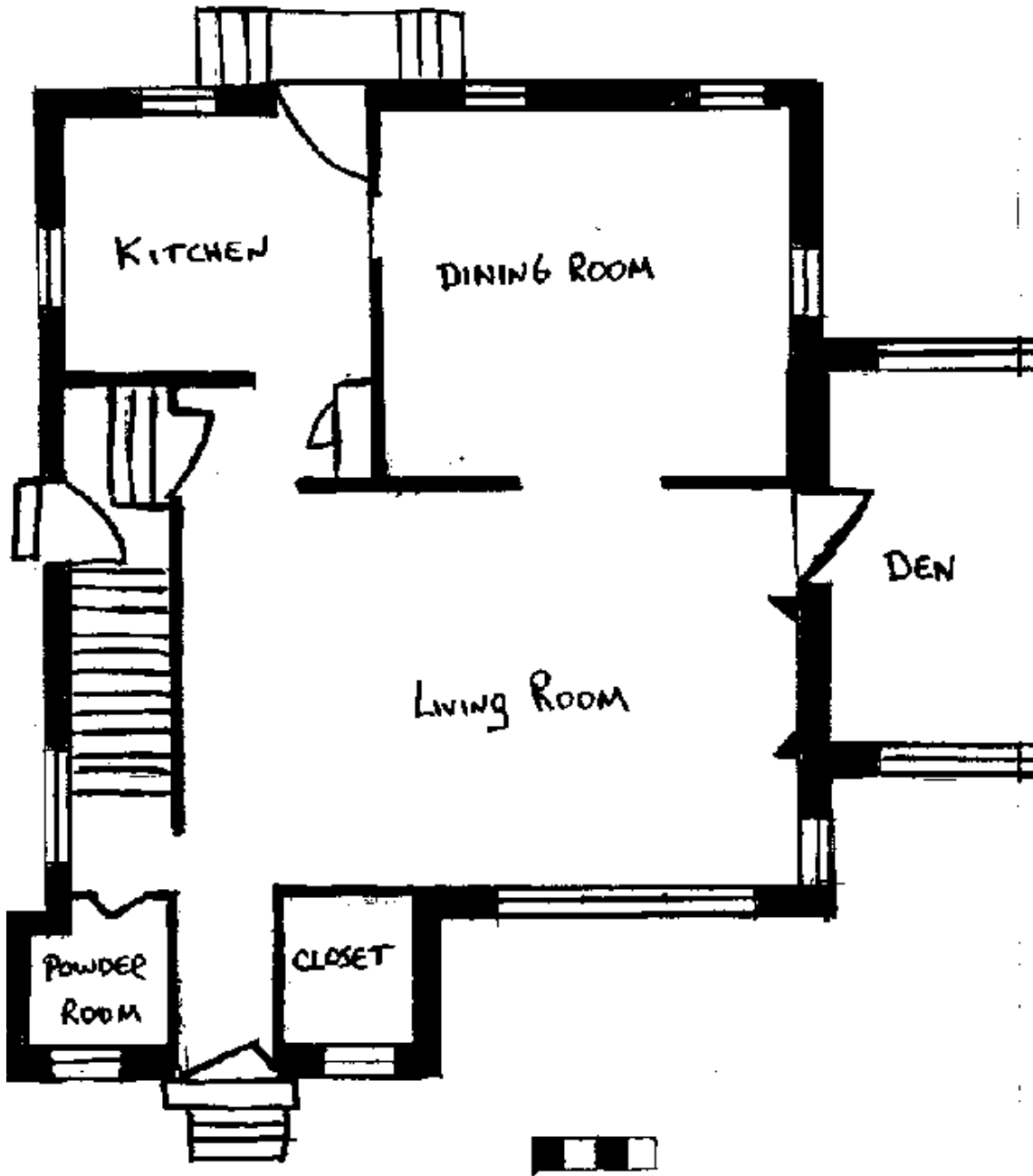


Location of Stanton Crest

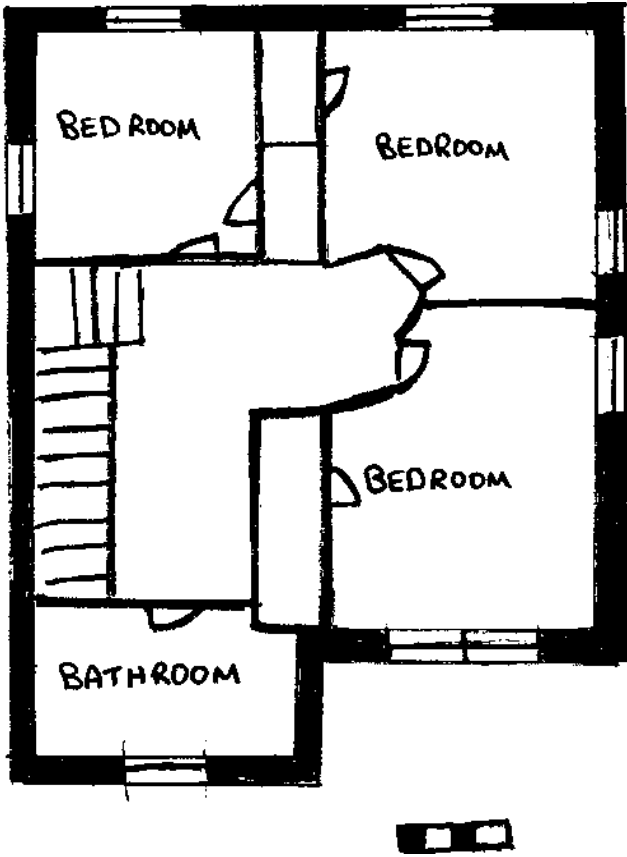


Site Plan Lot #16 Stanton Crest

Appendix B: Floor Plans



First Floor



Second Floor

Appendix C: Construction Costs

Item	Price
Excavation	\$100.00
Concrete Work: Footings, porch, steps and basement floors	
Masonry Work: Chimney, blocks ,bricks and fireplace	Total 2,076.25
Plaster	680.00
Lintels	
Beams	
Columns	
Reinforcing rods	
Wire Mesh	
Basement windows and glass	Total 169.03
Rough Hardware Nails Building paper	Total 67.00

Rough Lumber

Framing lumber

Sheathing

Sub Flooring

Plaster Grounds

Furring

Cross Bridging Total 1,274.17

Roofing

Shingles and paper

Flashing Total 170.00

Sheet metal

Gutters

Leaders Total 60.00

Oak Flooring Total 282.71

Interior finish

All millwork Total 1,222.25

Kitchen Cabinets 320.00

Kitchen Sink 144.00

Electric work

Wiring

Fixtures Total 291.34

Tilework

Bath (floor and
walls)

Powder room (floor Total 386.00
and

Kitchen (floor)

Plumbing 1,100.00

Hot Water Heater	165.00		
Heating	850.00		
Insulation	49.50		
Painting			
Interior			
Exterior		Total	400.00
Miscellaneous			
Floor finishing and	50.00		
1 Steel I beam 22'			
6"	144.03		
2 6" steel columns	600.00		
7'			
12,000 bricks			
		Grand Total	
			\$10,501.28

Note: This table does not reflect all of the accrued labor costs.
The final total cost was \$13,234.61.