

FORM B – BUILDING

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

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| 4/1 | Reading | | 439 |
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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
 MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
 220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
 BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Town: Reading

Place: (*neighborhood or village*)

Photograph



Address: 197 South Street

Historic Name: Holcomb-Bird House

Uses: Present: residential

Original: residential

Date of Construction: 1931

Source: water department records

Style/Form: English/Tudor Revival

Architect/Builder: Royal Barry Wills

Exterior Material:

Foundation: concrete

Wall/Trim: brick, wood

Roof: slate

Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:
none

Major Alterations (*with dates*):

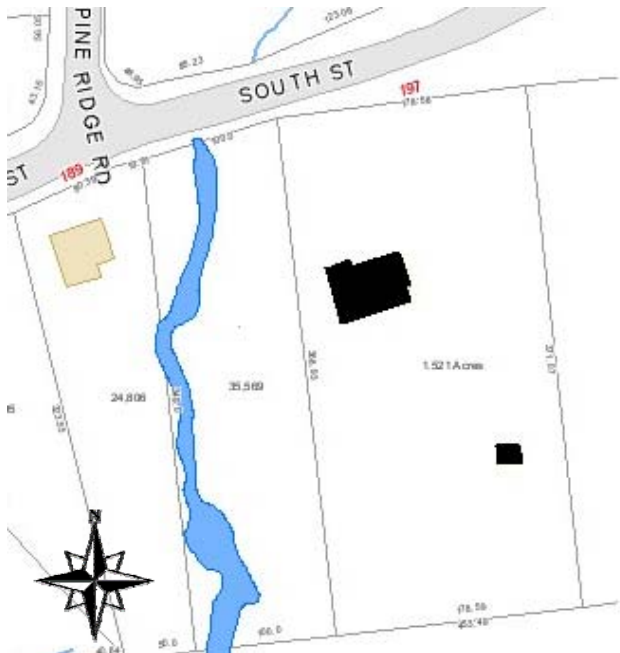
Condition: good

Moved: no | x | yes | | **Date** _____

Acreage: 1.52 acres

Setting: mixed residential on large lots

Topographic or Assessor's Map



Recorded by: Lisa Mausolf

Organization: Reading Historical Commission

Date (*month / year*): December 2009

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INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

READING

197 South Street

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.
If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.

The house at 197 South Street is one of two large Tudor Revival mansions in Reading. Like the other (17 Longview Road), the house surprisingly dates to the Depression era. The house is constructed of brick which has a white-washed appearance and the bond incorporates contrasting headers which form a diamond pattern. The steeply-pitched gable roof slopes are covered in slate shingles and there are two large brick chimneys. The east end of the house features a clipped (jerkinhead) gable and false half timbering over the two arched garage doors. The main entrance is located on the north elevation and consists of a simple board and batten door with large metal hinges, sheltered by an extension of the roof which is supported by a single post. Windows include groupings of diamond-paned casements and modern multi-pane casements.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.

In 1931 Alan H. Sturges of Medford purchased the former Walter S. Parker estate on Walnut Street from the Parker heirs. At the time the 90 acres was the largest intact tract of land in town. Sturges was then the vice president of the Atlantic National Bank and purchased the house (then 55 Walnut, later 93 Walnut, in 1990s renamed 15 Strawberry Hill) for year-round use but planned to develop some of the land (*Chronicle*, March 27, 1931). Valuation records indicate that in 1931 banker Sturges sold this 66,247 square feet of land to Charles and Edith Holcomb, as well as additional land to Elsie Dillaway (now 119 Walnut Street) and Dorothy Teel (now 113 Walnut). All three built houses although the Holcomb House was the most impressive and was valued at \$12,500 compared to \$8,500 and \$9,500 for the others.

Information from Charles Holcomb's diary identifies the architect of the house as Royal Barry Wills. In one entry he writes: "Had Royal Barry Wills the architect looking the place over today and his is very enthusiastic about the natural beauty of the place and its possibilities." In the fall of 1931 he wrote: "...I have gone ahead with the house. Today we had to meet the architect up there early and were thrilled to see smoke coming out of the chimney...". According to Holcomb's daughter, Holcomb himself had trained as an architect at Cornell but later went into advertising instead.

Charles and Edith Holcomb had moved from 14 John Street to South Street by 1933. He was employed in advertising and also served on the Reading School Board and was president of the Reading Neighborhood Betterment Association.

About 1946 the house was sold to Sidney and Katherine Bird who moved here from Stoneham. Stanley Karandanis purchased the property in the late 1970s and sold it in 2006.

The architect, Royal Barry Wills (1895-1962), is best known as master of the Cape Cod style house in its mid 20th century incarnation. Royal Barry Wills grew up in Melrose and graduated from MIT in 1918. After working as a design engineer with the Turner Construction Company from 1919 to 1925, Wills opened an architectural office in Boston in 1925 which he maintained until his death in 1962. His office specialized in small house design including traditional two-story, central hall houses and two-story garrison houses but became especially well known for their Cape Cod cottages. As seen here, Wills also designed a lesser number of Tudor Revival/English Revival homes. Of the 130 properties currently listed in the Massachusetts Historical Commission MACRIS database, about a dozen appear to be variations on the English Revival. These include 55 Blake Road in Brookline (1930), the Fitzpatrick Estate at 159 Saddle Hill in Hopkinton (1922); and a number of homes in Newton: 60 Beacon Street (1930); 199 Dorset Road (1929); 33 Gate House Road (1927); 11 Sagamore Road (1929); 24 Sagamore Road (1928); and 62 Sheffield Road (1931).

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Wills' designs met with considerable success. Between 1935 and 1942 he won awards in more than two dozen design competitions including those sponsored by *Pencil Points*, *House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. He authored several books on architecture that were widely read and publicized in both the popular and professional architectural press. He received a Certificate of Honor from the Massachusetts State Association of Architects in 1949 and a fellowship in the American Institute of Architects in 1954.

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