

355 R Pequot Avenue

c. 1925

Mary E. Perkins

The picturesque stone cottage behind 355 Pequot Avenue began its life as a garage. To put together its story, therefore, we needed to examine the history of "Harbor House," or the Israel LAY house (1853) (plaqued). Our research indicates that the house was actually built around 1858 (not 1853) by James Reed, carpenter.

In 1852, property in this area was given to Israel Rogers Lay, a boy of about three years of age, by his grandfather, John Rogers or Rodgers. Captain John Rogers (1791-1867) was a retired seaman, a farmer on what was then known as Harbor Road (1855 City Directory). He was the son of Israel Rogers, also a property owner and farmer in the vicinity. One of John Rodgers' daughters, Abby Jane Rogers Lay, was the first wife of Carlos William Lay (1821-1901) of Norwich. Abby Jane died at or soon after Israel Lay's birth in 1849, and Carlos Lay soon remarried and started a new family in Norwich.

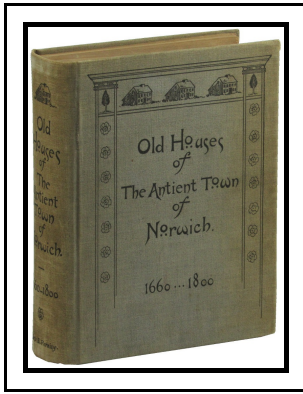
The property records specify that if Israel Lay died while still a minor, the property was to go to C.W. Lay – Carlos William Lay – Israel's father. But Israel Lay did not die as a minor, but C.W. Lay acted on his behalf in selling the property. His mother, Abby Jane, had owned adjoining property, which Carlos Lay inherited at his wife's death. In 1859, Carlos Lay sold both pieces of land without buildings, as per deed research by Tom Couser. Though speculation, it seems probable that Israel's grandfather Rogers was not pleased.

For the rest of the story of what happened to Israel Lay, we were stumped until finding John Rogers's 1864 will (Ancestry.com). The will mentions that his grandson, Israel Lay, was living in New London at the time, and it specifies that Israel would inherit a third of John Rogers' estate on condition that the boy change his name to Israel Rogers. This he apparently did, though tracking him proved difficult, there being a number of Israel Rogers in New London in the second half of the 19th century.

In any event, the property next went to James Reed, Jr, whose address is listed as Harbor Road in the 1859 city directory. It was probably Reed who built the house as he is listed as a carpenter in city directories. Reed sold the property to Mrs. Mary C. Spenser [sic] in 1865.

The former Mary Manwaring, Mrs. Spenser was the widow of Uriah Spenser (1780-1857). The 1860 census lists her living on Harbor Road with her divorced daughter, Harriet, 24, a dressmaker, and Harriet's two children, William H. Crosby, 11, and Harriet Crosby, 6. Mrs Spenser passed away in 1868, and presumably it was her estate that sold the property to Thomas Kiley in 1871. His widow, Hannah Kiley, sold the property to investors, Wheeler and Miner, in 1895, and they in turn sold it Henry R. Bond, Jr., nephew of Maj. Frank S. Bond, whose house is now part of Mitchell College Library. Henry Bond, Jr., a founder and primary investor in New London Ship &

Engine, sold the Pequot Avenue property in 1896 to Miss Mary E. Perkins.



Having lived at 355 Pequot for some 24 years, Mary E. Perkins (c.1848-1935) appears in the US Census in 1920, age 71, with 1 (female) servant and 9 (single, male) borders. By the 1920s, with so many people living at her home, a parking garage may have become a necessity.

Little is known about Mary E. Perkins's, though she was the respected author of a number of historical works, including *Old Houses of the Antient Town of Norwich* (1895) and *Chronicles of a Connecticut Farm* (1905), commissioned by her cousin and neighbor, Alfred Mitchell (1832-1911).<sup>1</sup> By 1930 she was living at 355 alone, the house valued at \$12,000. Exactly when, we are not sure, but it must have been Mary Perkins who had the garage constructed behind the house.

Miss Perkins was the only surviving child of the Honorable Edmund Perkins of Norwich and his first wife, Elizabeth Macy Wilkinson. Edmund Perkins and his second wife, Juliet Warner, had more children. Edmund was a well known attorney and state senator and was associated with the Underground Railroad. He died in 1865 when Mary was about 17 years old, and she then lived with her father's sisters in Norwich until moving to Monument Street, Groton, and other local addresses in the 1890s, until purchasing 355 Pequot in 1896. (She doesn't show up on Pequot Avenue in city directories until 1899.)

In the early 20th century there was a drawn-out, complicated probate case involving Mary Perkins and some relatives, but time did not permit us to delve into this matter. We wonder, though, if something connected with her legal problems prompted her to open a boarding house in that time-frame.

The Tax Assessor lists the construction date of the garage as 1910. We suspect it was later. Since the prolific New London contractor, Henry R. Griswold, bought, moved into, and completely renovated the large house next door at 361 Pequot ("the Moorings"), we have a hunch that the work was done for Miss Perkins by Griswold in the 1920s. This seems especially likely because the masonry work on the ground floor of 361, its garage (the "Sailing Center"), as well as the garage at 355R are all identical.<sup>2</sup>

Miss Perkins died in 1935. By 1937, the address is listed as "vacant." The following year, in 1938, 355 Pequot was rented to Mrs O.H. Worth, with 355R "vacant."

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell-Tiffany family papers, MS 701, Yale Archives. Alfred Mitchell's sister-in-law was Mary Shaw Woodbridge Perkins. Exactly how Alfred was related to Mary E. Perkins was not researched.

<sup>2</sup> According to Dale Plummer's survey of Mitchell campus buildings, 361 Pequot was built in 1868 but completely remodeled in 1903. That may be so, but it was remodeled again by Griswold in the 1920s. We do not know when living accommodations were added to 355R, since it was not unusual for a chauffeur to have an apartment over a garage.

This was the first time that 355R shows up in the records as a separate address.



Garage behind The Moorings used as Sailing Center



355R Pequot Avenue

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The narrative above starts with the title chain researched by Thomas Couser. From there we looked at primary and secondary sources, including census records, city directories, newspaper accounts, local and family histories, cemetery and military service records. This is by no means an exhaustive search but is meant to give an idea of the people involved in the earlier history of the home.

– Mary Beth Baker for New London Landmarks, October 24, 2022.