

Yankee
✓ May 1991

HOUSE FOR SALE

(*Yankee* likes to mosey around and see, out of editorial curiosity, what you can turn up when you go home hunting. We have no stake in the sale whatsoever and would decline it if offered)



The Extraordinary Mrs. Washburn

All but forgotten until last year, the late Alice Washburn designed and built some 90 houses in Connecticut back in the 1920s. This spring three of them are on the market.

by Jim Collins (Guest Moseyer)

JUST A YEAR AGO THE NAME WASHBURN didn't mean much to most folks living in the suburbs around Cheshire and Hamden, Connecticut. (Truth be told, it didn't mean much to us, either.) Fortunately, it *did* mean something to Martha Yellig, who had moved to Hamden



The arched doorways and elaborate mantel (facing page) of Jayne Morley's Hamden, Connecticut, house (above, as seen from the outside) are characteristic of the houses designed and built by Alice Washburn (inset, left).



in 1978 and had taken an interest in rumors she began hearing about “an extraordinary woman” who designed and built houses in this area back in the 1920s. Her curiosity grew as the rumored houses began appearing in clusters — along Blake and Swarthmore streets, along Mill Rock Road — so when she had to choose a subject a few years later for her art history thesis at Southern Connecticut State, she decided to do some digging and find out what the rumors were all about.

Her research led to a mysterious and gifted woman named Alice Washburn, a retired schoolteacher who began building magnificent houses in 1919 — at the age of 49, with no formal training — and who, after completing close to 90 of the finest houses in the greater New Haven area, retired 12 years later, widowed, in bankruptcy and humiliation, to finish out her life in a small rented apartment with her sister, Florence. For one of the most prolific women architects in U.S. history, her death certificate in 1958 read simply: “Occupation: housewife.”

Martha Yellig’s work created a wave of interest and appreciation of Mrs. Washburn’s work. Last year the Eli Whitney Museum in Hamden hosted a four-month-long Washburn celebration that attracted attention far and wide; the house tours alone drew some 1,400 people. Eventually, you could say, her work led us to within a stone’s throw of the Whitney Museum — to Jayne Morley’s library at 89 Killdeer Road, where we found ourselves enjoying coffee and doughnuts on a sunny morning this past winter. Mrs. Morley, a real estate agent, had tipped us off on three Washburn Colonials that were just then on the market. One of them happened to be her own.

“We bought the house 31 years ago,” Mrs. Morley told us, “and we raised eight kids here.” Gretchen, 36, and Kurt, 19, joined us in the library as we talked about the house and the neighborhood — and about Mrs. Washburn, who built this house in 1928 for the vice-president of the Union & New Haven Trust Co. That it was built for a prominent family didn’t surprise us.

The graceful moldings, arches, beautiful built-ins, and quality workmanship were easy to see wherever we looked. The ornate fireplace mantel in the living room, we learned, was a Washburn trademark. Another trademark was the back porch with its elegant Doric columns (though on other houses it was often on the side rather than the back). “But you know,” said Mrs. Morley, “rather than the architecture and all those details, what I like is the easy traffic flow she created and the windows. As you can see, every room has plenty of light.” She went on to tell us about some of the other nice touches that made the house such a joy — for entertaining, for raising kids, just to *live* in. At a time when fewer than one percent of all architects were women, Mrs. Washburn believed that women were best equipped to design houses because they were the ones who had to both live and work in them.

After we had a second cup of coffee (and two more doughnuts), Mrs. Morley suggested we visit the other two houses for sale. We headed first to 135 Spring Glen Terrace about five minutes north. The Spring Glen section of Hamden, we were told, was another residential neighborhood with lots of professional families and Yale influence. The university is a short drive away. The house we saw stands on a nicely landscaped lot that is unusually large for the area. Like Mrs. Morley’s house, this one stands out from its neighbors. A leaded fanlight and sidelights surround the front door, which is embellished by a small, columned portico — the fancy entrance being another Washburn signature. Inside we saw more of the same attention to detail in the center hall and dining room, the same type of gorgeous wood trim, with lots of light coming through the eight-over-eight windows. In a room at the top of the stairs we found a nice surprise: a tiny nursery bath, complete with narrow oval sink and not much room for anything else. Some of the other surprises didn’t seem so nice to us. At some point the large, open side porch had been closed in and finished off for a family room, and the kitchen, even though its new bow window

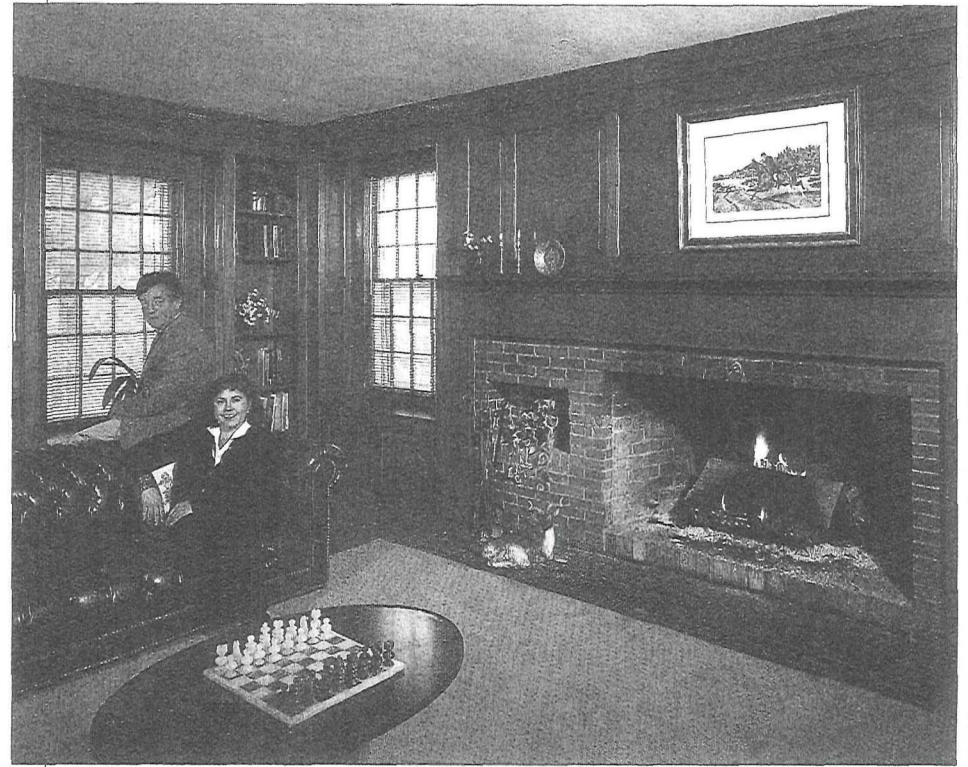


and recessed lighting were pleasant enough in themselves, didn't seem to match the feeling of the older rooms.

Jay McManus met us in the kitchen and spent some time showing us old photographs of the house. (His wife, Sandy, who worked on the publicity of the Washburn celebration, was at work.) They bought the house six years ago, the third family to own it since it was built in 1925. When they moved in, the house needed

Jay and Sandy McManus (above) are only the third family to own their Washburn house in the Spring Glen part of Hamden since it was built in 1925. The elegant staircase and fancy entrance with fanlight, sidelights, and columned portico (left) are signatures of Alice Washburn's work.

“major renovation.” Five small rooms were gutted to expand and modernize the kitchen; sliding-glass doors were installed looking out to the 3,000-brick patio that Jay laid. (“That nearly put me in the hospital,” said Jay.) They’ve completed most of the work now, but feel it’s time to move into a new kind of house — this is the fourth Colonial Revival-era house they have lived in, and they’ve been thinking of moving down to the Connecticut shore. But they won’t forget what it was like living in a Washburn house. “The bonding among Washburn owners during the celebration was amazing,” Sandy told us later. “We met



Nelson and Joanna Martin's Woodbridge, Connecticut, Washburn house is set well back from the road and shaded by large trees (left). The living room features a large brick fireplace surrounded by raised panels (above). In houses built by Alice Washburn, no two fireplaces are ever alike.

people we'd never otherwise have met. It was such a great feeling."

We were thinking about the celebration (it felt like we were on the house tour) when we reached the third house for sale, which is located on 25 Fairgrounds Road in next-door Woodbridge. Set well back from the road and shaded by towering pines and

maples, the house appeared even more gracious than the previous two. The wide front door is nicely recessed and opens to an elegant foyer and sweeping staircase. In the dining room off the foyer we couldn't take our eyes off the elaborate built-in corner cupboard, whose arched top was carved in the form of a scallop shell. The arch motif

is picked up throughout the house. There are window seats in the living room and a large brick fireplace surrounded by raised panels — no two Washburn fireplaces are alike, we had been told. A screened-in back porch (again, with columns) looks out over formal gardens and a quaint in-ground pool encased by brick and slate. But our favorite part of the house is the library over the attached two-car garage (another Washburn innovation; garages at that time, when they were built, were usually detached). Up here, the room glows with the golden color of rich African mahogany paneling, and books fill the floor-to-ceiling shelves along one of the walls.

Owner Joanna Martin has just the background to discuss the house's features. An interior designer and art history major, Mrs. Martin met several other Washburn owners during the tours last May, as well as the daughter of this house's original owner. Mrs. Martin admitted that she liked, more than anything, the symmetry of Mrs. Washburn's designs ("heaven to work with"). "The foyers are lovely and spacious," she told us. "They're the introduction; they set the tone. And the handle-damper on the outside of the library fireplace. Touches like that make for gracious living as well as a gracious home."

In the end it may have been that commitment to detail and graciousness that did Mrs. Washburn in. By the time her husband died in 1926, she had already established herself as one of the area's leading architects, and she was building houses at the incredible pace of eight per year. Her devotion to perfection, however — insisting on the highest-quality materials or a certain window or fireplace treatment, even when the owners couldn't afford it — increasingly required her to pay money out of her own pocket, costing her profits. When the Depression hit a few years later, Mrs. Washburn owed more than \$82,000 to local suppliers and contractors. The courts stripped her of nearly everything she owned, including the family homestead in Cheshire where she grew up. She moved

into a small apartment with her sister with precious few belongings, destined to live out her life in obscurity.

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IN A SINGLE DAY WE HAD COME TO KNOW more about Alice Washburn than most architectural historians know — at least more than they knew before all the recent publicity. Still, we wanted to look up one more person before heading back north. We wanted to hear the memories of Isabel Wilder, a woman who was turning 91 in just a few days and who had known Mrs. Washburn personally. Her brother Thornton had contracted with Mrs. Washburn to build their family home on Deepwood Drive in Hamden. Built largely with proceeds from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (which won Thornton the 1928 Pulitzer Prize), the Medieval English house was a departure from Mrs. Washburn's Colonial-influenced designs, but it was created with the same personal touches and fine craftsmanship. Mrs. Wilder recalled an extremely capable, self-taught woman who gave the family exactly what they wanted, at exactly the cost they had budgeted. She talked about the skill of Mrs. Washburn's workmen (a force that totaled 40 carpenters at times) and Mrs. Washburn's insistence on supervising every aspect of the construction. She painted a picture of a meticulous,

Thornton Wilder asked Mrs. Washburn to build him a Medieval English-style house.



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After we said good-bye and had headed home, we could almost see the Victorian dowager in a long black dress, climbing a ladder to check on some construction detail on the rooftop. The last question we had asked Isabel Wilder was still playing in our head: Had the family become friends with Mrs. Washburn after she completed their house? "Mrs. Washburn was a busy professional woman," answered Mrs. Wilder, "and we treated her that way, with respect. We had lunch several times during the building, of course, but we didn't see her much after the house was built. She was a very busy woman. She wasn't out there playing around, you know."

And we did. □□

89 KILLDEER ROAD

ONE OF TWO WASHBURN COLONIALS on Killdeer Road, the Morleys' house is offered for sale at \$385,000. The house has six bedrooms (ten rooms total), 3½ baths, and an attached two-car garage. Contact Jayne Morley at Kamp & Nielsen Realtors, 203-281-4411.

135 SPRING GLEN TERRACE

BUILT IN 1926 FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT of the American Steel & Wire Co., the McManuses' house has five bedrooms (ten rooms total), 1½ baths, and a two-car garage. It is listed at \$395,000 with Carroll Peck of First Woodbridge Waple, Realtors, 203-389-2105.

25 FAIRGROUNDS ROAD

ONE OF JUST TWO WASHBURN HOUSES in Woodbridge, the Martins' house was built for Yale history professor Arthur Darling in 1929. It has four bedrooms (ten rooms total), 3½ baths, a second-floor kitchen, attached two-car garage, and 2.7 acres. The asking price is \$595,000. Contact Pat Smith of First Woodbridge Waple, Realtors, 203-389-2105.