

NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORIC PROPERTY DOCUMENTATION
BOISSONEAU HOUSE
NH STATE NO. 688

Location: 779 First Avenue, Berlin, Coos County, New Hampshire

USGS Berlin Quadrangle
UTM Coordinates: Z19 4926440N 3260100E

Present Owner: State of New Hampshire

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant

Construction/

Renovation Date: 1899; late 20th century - rear ell raised and expanded; c.2000 – addition of garage wing.

Significance: This house contributes to the Berlin Heights Addition Historic District under Criterion A. It is of note as one of three identical houses (779, 785 and 789) constructed in a row at the end of First Avenue by prominent local developer Gershon Bickford in the late 1890s. It was owned by the same French Canadian family for over sixty years.

Project Info.: Project personnel included Lisa Mausolf, Historian, and Charley Freiberg, Photographer. Existing Conditions Surveys, Inc. prepared the plans. This documentation is mitigation for the relocation of NH Route 110 through the Berlin Heights Neighborhood Addition Historic District. This document draws extensively from earlier documentation prepared by Preservation Company including The Avenues/Berlin Heights Addition Historic District Area Form 2004 and the 2008 addendum. The large format photographs were taken in October 2010 and January 2011 and the report was finalized in August 2015. The building was demolished in Winter 2011/Spring 2012.

Description:

The house at 779 First Avenue is the southernmost of what were originally three nearly identical single-family houses constructed at the north end (west side) of First Avenue in 1899 (the others are 785 and 789 First Avenue). As originally constructed, this was a 1 ½-story, side-gabled house with a central gable wall dormer. In recent years, the original rear ell was expanded significantly and a large garage wing was added on the south side.

The main house block has a mortared rubble foundation and walls that are sheathed in wood shingles. The roof is covered with standing seam metal and an exterior concrete block chimney is located on the north gable end. The predominant window is a replacement 1/1 sash although there is also a sliding unit on the south wall.

The east façade is distinguished by a prominent gable wall dormer with a single 1/1 window centered in the gable. The entire façade is fronted by a single-story enclosed porch accessed by wooden stairs with a landing in front of the door. All three of the houses have similar enclosed porches today, but only one (785 First) was shown with a porch on the Sanborn maps (Sanborn 1950). The porch on 779 First Avenue is constructed of T1-11 plywood and has two sets of three windows on either side of the central storm door.

As shown on Sanborn maps, the rear ell was originally a single-story, aligned with the north wall and had a footprint which was slightly smaller than the 20' x 15' front section. In recent years the ell was raised to two stories and its footprint expanded to 20' x 26", set on a concrete foundation with a wooden deck to the rear. Like the front section, the expanded ell is sheathed in wood shingles. Changes in the foundation from stone to concrete and differences in the wood shingles on the north wall offer indications as to the extent of the original ell (see photo 5). Fenestration on the expanded portion of the ell includes smaller 1/1 windows, an octagonal window, sliding units and a large sliding door leading to the back deck.

Within the last ten years a large, two-story, shed-roofed addition with ground floor garage has been constructed to the south of the original house. The irregularly-shaped building is set on a concrete block foundation and is sheathed in T1-11 siding. Facing the street is a double-wide, overhead garage door with a regular door to the north. Windows consist of small vinyl 1/1 units. The southwest corner of the addition is angled to follow the property line of the triangular-shaped lot. There is a short paved driveway in front of the garage. A low concrete retaining wall is located along the street, south of the driveway and connects to the taller retaining wall of the house to the south. A large hedge grows above the wall. The north wall of the house is also set closet to the adjacent lot line. There is a large deciduous tree/shrub at the north corner of the house, near the street. A

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row of small arborvitae is planted along the north property line and continues around the back deck.

Interior:

The building at 779 First Avenue was constructed in 1899 as a single-family dwelling and has served that purpose since its construction. Originally, the house like its neighbors at 785 and 789 First Avenue employed a plan found in many small houses of the period. There was a large front room, entered directly through the front door, with the kitchen in the rear ell and several small bedrooms on the second floor accessed by a stair between the main block and rear ell.¹ However this house has been extensively renovated and expanded in recent years and no historic features appear to remain inside. The main entry into the house is through the enclosed front porch. The interior walls of the porch have been covered with paneling and vinyl, the floor is carpeted and there is a suspended ceiling with acoustical tiles. The only opening on the original façade is an off-center door containing a modern multi-light unit. The doorway would have originally been flanked by windows but these have been removed. Inside, the living room has a laminate floor and the walls and ceilings are painted drywall. Adjacent to the front door, a wooden post gives rise to an east-west ceiling beam. The reason for the beam is not known although it may indicate a previous room division. Part of the west wall of the living room adjacent to the basement stairs has been sheathed with diagonal boards. To the west of the living room is a large modern kitchen renovated c.2000 with oak cabinets, a large central island, granite countertops, a ceramic tile floor and sliding door to the back deck.

From the kitchen, a modern staircase leads to the second level and has oak wood steps and rail and a ceramic tile landing. The second floor is comprised of a full bathroom and three bedrooms including two in the historic main block. The larger of these two bedrooms incorporates the front gable dormer. Again, there is no evidence of any historic finishes. The walls are modern drywall; there are baseboard registers and there are no moldings. The basement is an unfinished crawl space with a visible granite outcropping.

The c.2000 garage addition has a workshop/storage room on the upper level. A stairway in the garage leads to the kitchen in the main house.

¹ See Preservation Company, *Berlin – The City That Trees Built: Turning Land and Lumber Into Neighborhoods* (Kensington, NH, 2015), 61. Also Preservation Company, Level I Documentation Report for 789 First Avenue.

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History:

Developer Gershon Bickford filed a new subdivision plan for three lots in 1897 (Coos County Registry of Deeds Plan 1897 Book 90, Page 403) and soon after, three matching houses were built in a row at the end of First Avenue (779, 785 and 789 First Avenue). The trio of identical houses was unusual for Berlin. Gershon Percival Bickford (1873-1962) was born in New York City but raised in Washington, D.C. His father was a native of Milan, New Hampshire. Gershon Bickford moved to Berlin in the early 1890s and remained here until 1909 when he returned to Maryland where he continued as a real estate agent. During his nearly twenty years in Berlin, Bickford played a significant role in the development of residential properties in the city, as a real estate agent, developer and financier and was active in many of Berlin's newly developing neighborhoods. In addition to acquiring land and developing the lots as speculative housing or for rental purposes, he also resold unimproved lots and provided mortgages. The magnitude of his real estate activity is evident in hundreds of transactions in County grantor and grantee indices. He lived with his family at 739 Second Avenue (Preservation Company 2015: 55-56).

In 1899 Bickford sold this house to the Boissoneau family who lived here for many years (Deed 1899 97:76). The Census returns seem to offer conflicting information about family members especially birth dates, however it seems clear that the family had come to Berlin from Quebec about 1885. Julia Boissoneau (born in 1848 or 1852?) was a widow and lived here with her three grown children. The 1900 Census reports that she was a housekeeper, Mary was a servant and Dennis and Emma worked as shoemakers. In 1910 Dennis is listed as the head-of-house and was employed as a laborer at the paper mill. He lived here with his sister Emma, brother (?) Leo, and Julia. The Census return notes that Julia had had seven children, of whom only three were living. Perhaps the most accurate information found for a family member comes from Dennis Boissoneau's World War I Draft Registration Card (1917-18) which indicates that he was born on March 14, 1877 in Canada and worked as a lead burner's helper at the Brown Company Cascade Mill. His next-of-kin is listed as his mother, Mrs. Julia Boissoneau. By 1930 Dennis, age 52, was living here with his 50 year old sister Emma (Ancestry.com). Dennis Boissoneau lived here until the 1960s (1950, 1961 directory). After that time this was a rental property (Directory 1974). The property was owned and occupied by Diane Garon from 1987 until 2010 when it was sold to the State of New Hampshire.

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Bibliography

Ancestry.com.

Berlin Directories, various dates.

Coos County Registry of Deeds, Lancaster, NH.

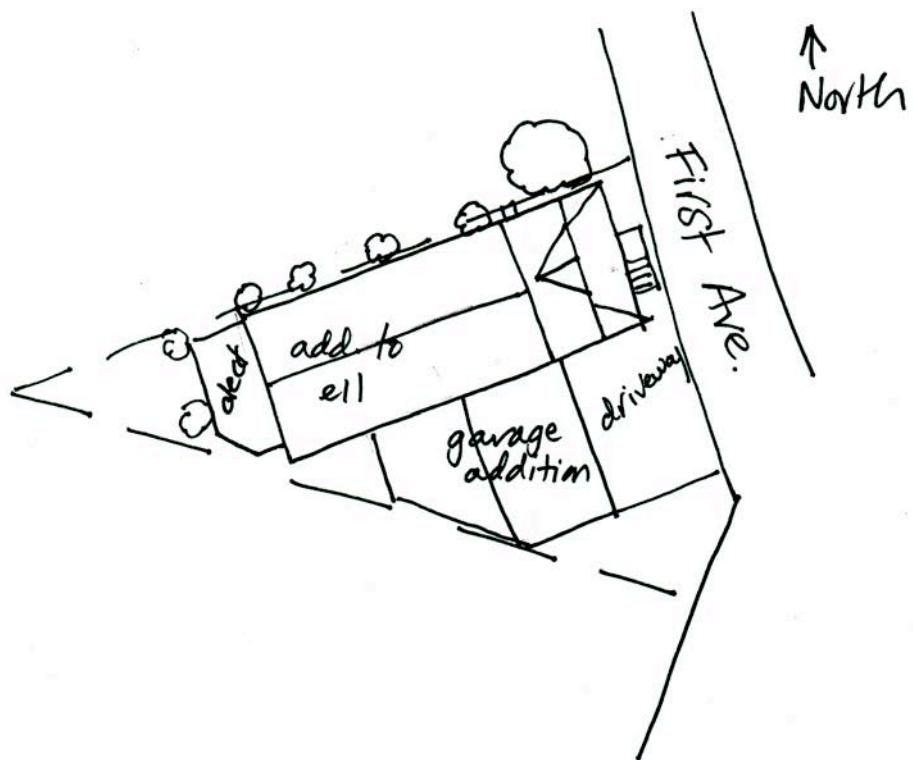
Preservation Company. Area Form for the Avenues/Berlin Heights Addition Historic District, 2008 Addendum. [On file at the NH Division of Historical Resources, Concord].

Preservation Company. *Berlin – The City That Trees Built: Turning Land and Lumber Into Neighborhoods*. Kensington, NH: 2015. [Prepared for the NH Department of Transportation and on file at the NH Division of Historical Resources, Concord].

Sanborn Insurance Maps, Berlin, 1901, 1905, 1909, 1914, 1928, 1950, 1955.

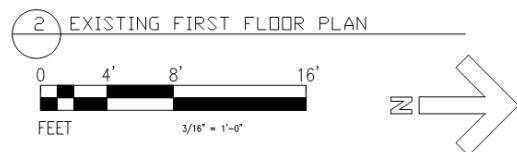
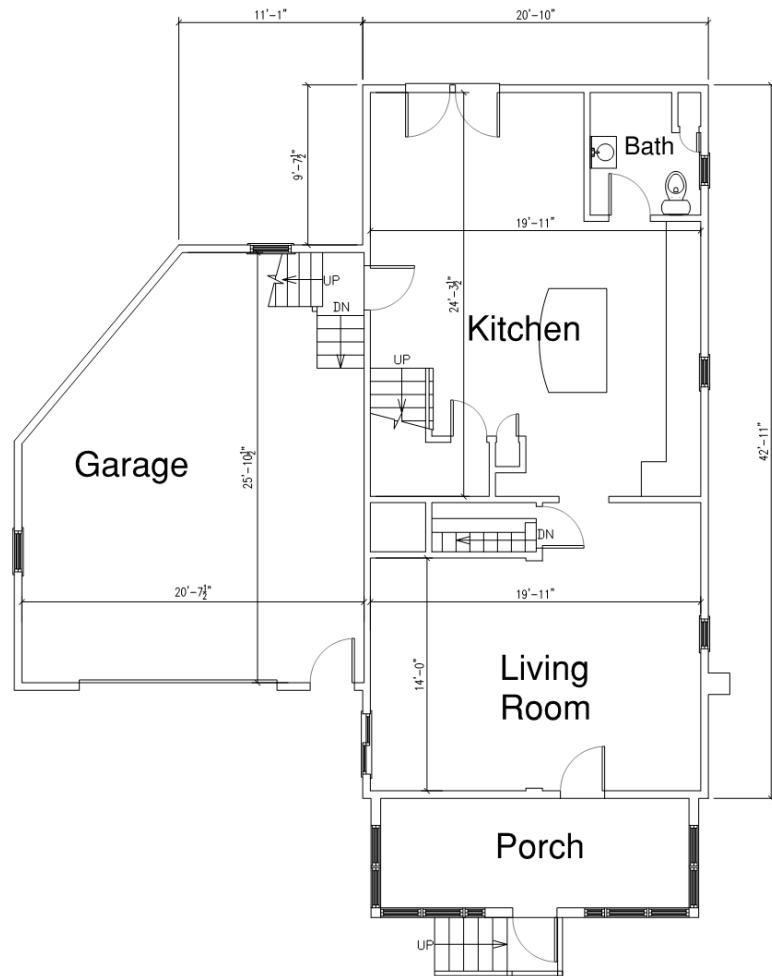
U.S. Census, 1900-1930.

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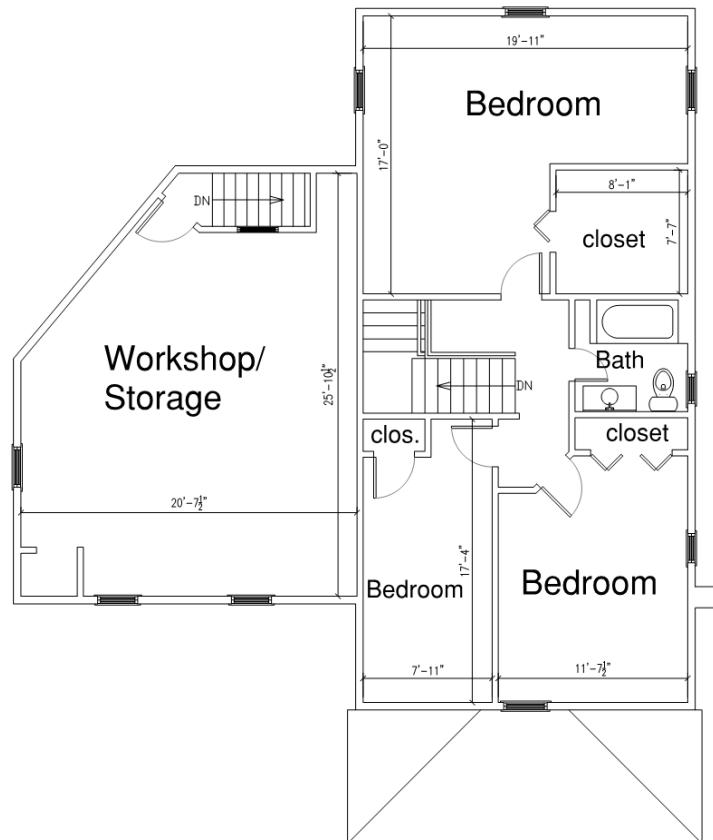
Existing Site Map

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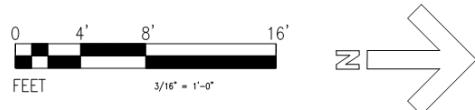


Existing First Floor Plan

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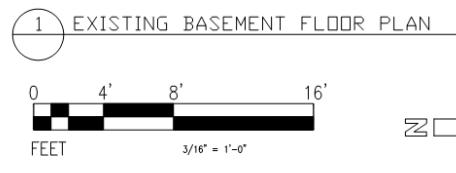
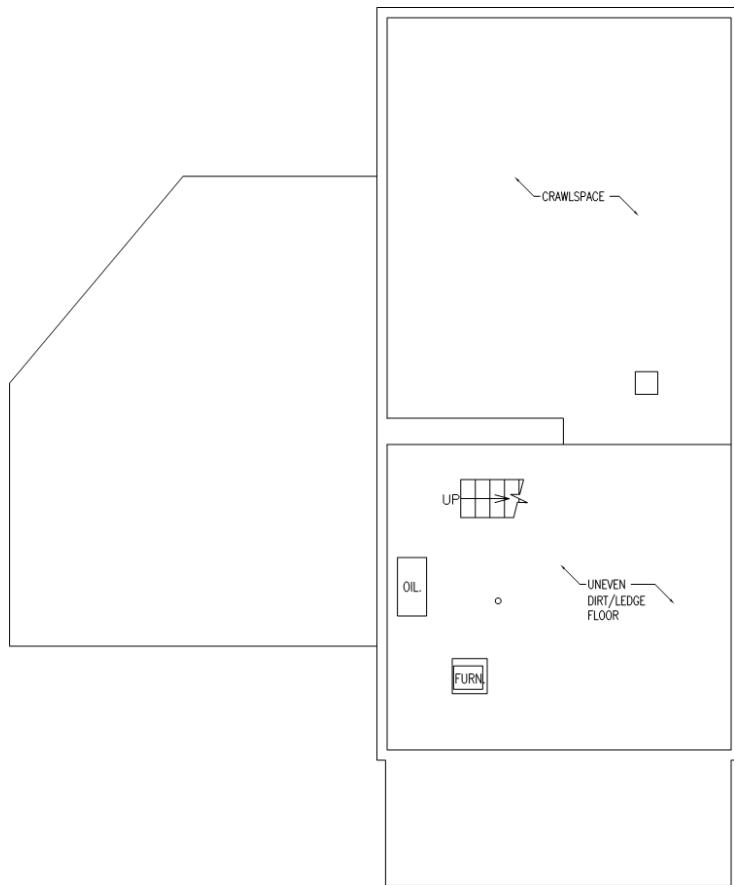


3 EXISTING SECOND FLOOR PLAN



Existing Second Floor Plan

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Existing Basement Floor Plan

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NH State No. 688-1	View looking southwest showing east (façade) elevation. [October 2010]
NH State No. 688-2	View looking west showing south and east (façade) elevations. [October 2010]
NH State No. 688-3	View looking southwest showing east (facade) and north elevations. [January 2011]
NH State No. 688-4	View looking north showing south elevations. [October 2010]
NH State No. 688-5	View looking east showing north and west (rear) elevations [October 2010]
NH State No. 688-6	Interior, inside front porch, looking northwest at front door. [January 2011]
NH State No. 688-7	Interior, first floor living room, looking east toward front door. [January 2011]
NH State No. 688-8	Interior, first floor, looking west, from living room toward kitchen. [January 2011]
NH State No. 688-9	Interior, second floor, looking northeast toward front gable window. [January 2011]
NH State No. 688-10	View of rock outcropping in basement. [January 2011]

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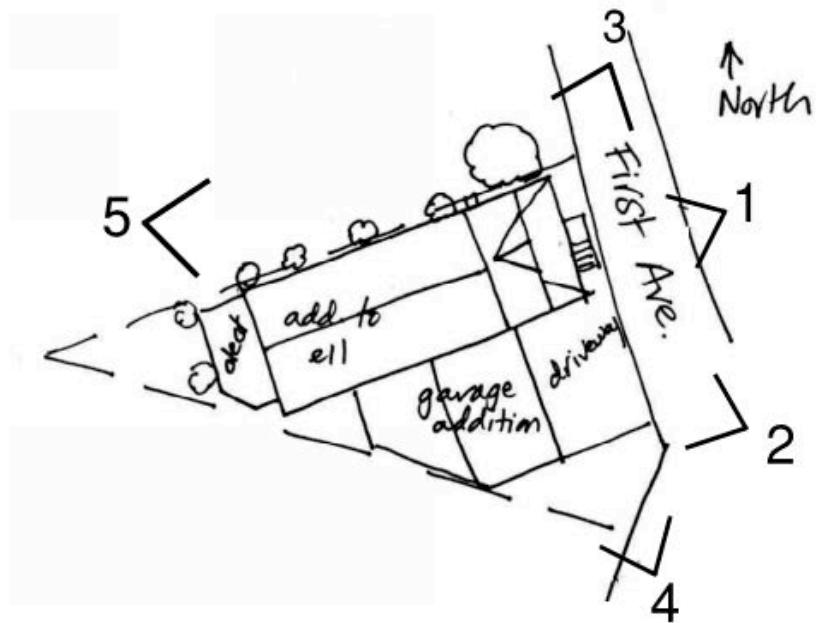


Photo Key – Exterior Photos

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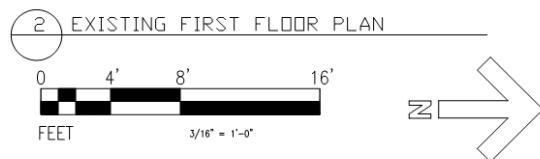
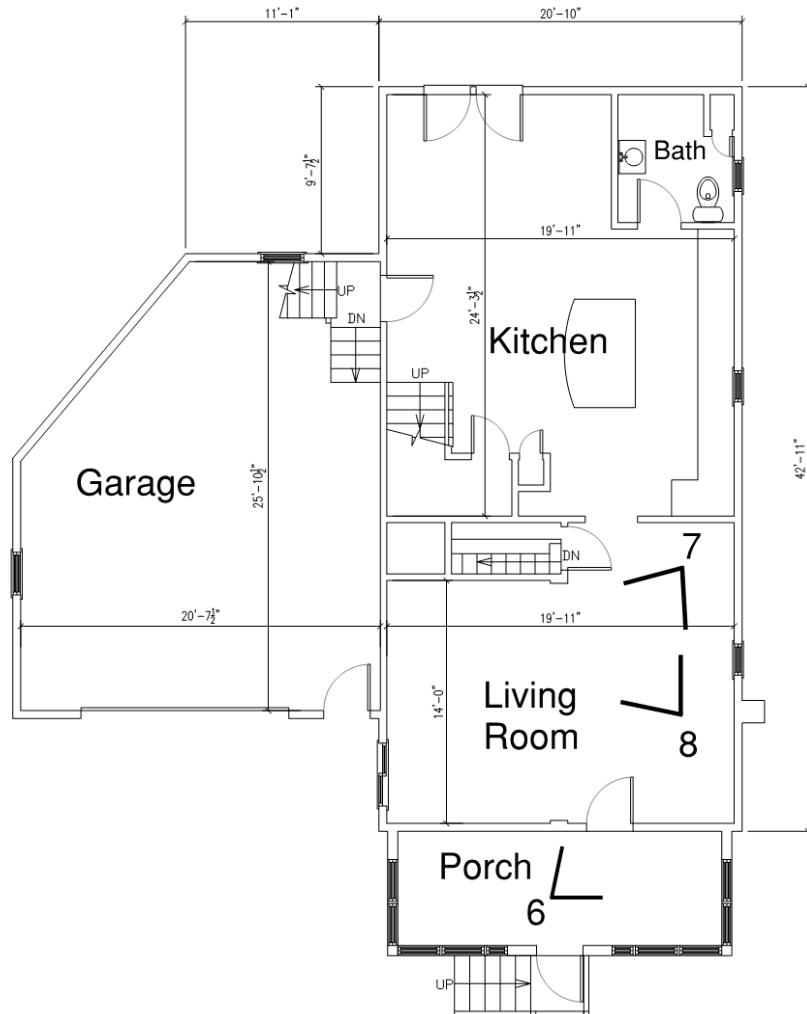


Photo Key – First Floor Photos

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(3) EXISTING SECOND FLOOR PLAN

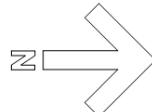
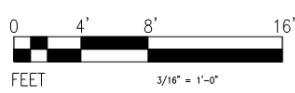


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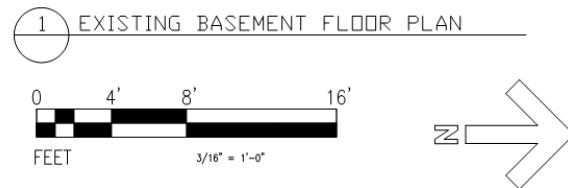
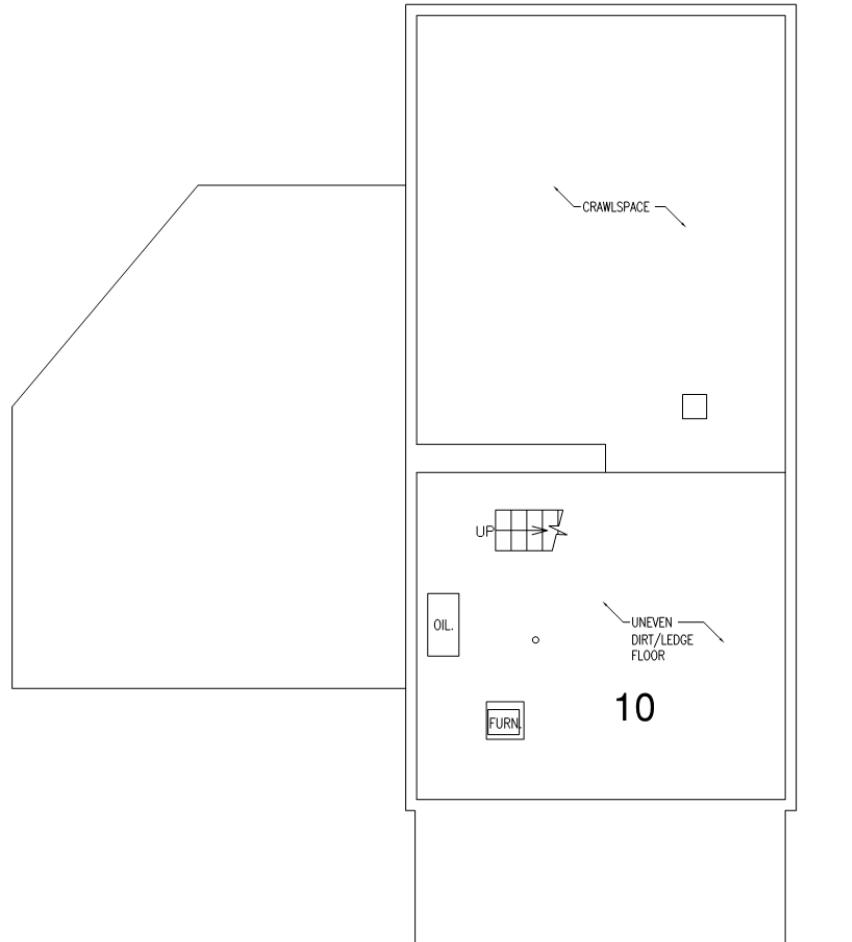
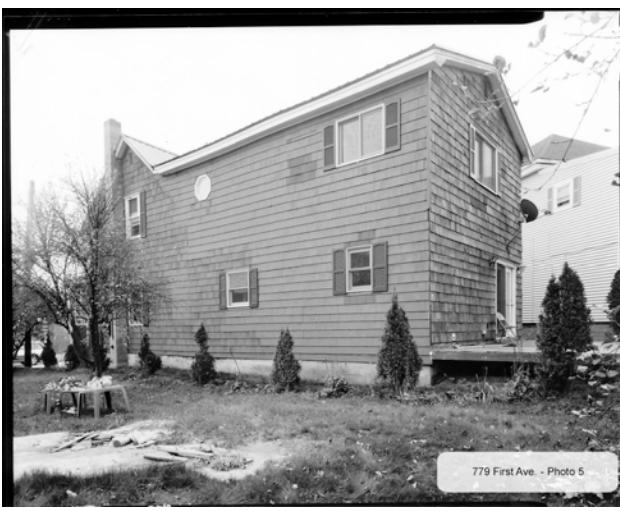


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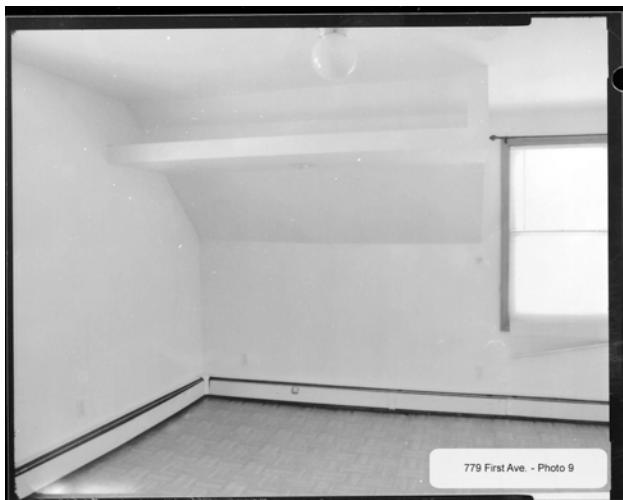




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779 First Ave. - Photo 10