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NOTES ON THE DOCTOR WALTER J. ROBERTS HOUSE 9 ACADEMY STREET ROCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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The following notes were made after a brief visit to the house on the afternoon of April 1, 1998. Many people from the Strafford Guidance Center, owners of the house, were present and were deeply interested in the history and significance of the house, but a thorough examination of the building was not possible in the brief time that was available.

The house dates from about 1914. Sanborn Insurance Company maps (attached) show that the small house lot on which the house originally stood was part of an elongated lot for the N. T. Kimball House, which still stands at the corner of Main Street and Academy Street and has the address of 87 Main Street. The Sanborn map of 1908 shows the house lot behind the Kimball House to be intact. The Sanborn map of 1914 shows that the lot had been subdivided and that the Dr. Roberts House, and the house next door at 7 Academy Street, had been built by that time.

Rochester City Directories list Dr. Roberts as living at 46 Main Street in 1909 and at 51 Portland Street in 1912-13. The next available directory, for 1917, shows Dr. Roberts living at 9 Academy Street. Since Dr. Roberts was living on Portland Street in 1912-13 and the map of 1914 shows his house standing on Academy Street, construction of that house is dated fairly closely to 1914.

The Dr. Roberts House stood on its original small lot, which measured about 45 feet on the street by about 85 feet deep, until 1925. The Sanborn map of July 1925 shows the original lot. An updated Sanborn map, still dated July 1925, shows that Dr. Roberts had bought and demolished a duplex house next door at 11-13 Academy Street and had built a garage on this site. He had also acquired about half of a large lot behind his house, formerly connected with the Sumner Wallace Mansion on Main Street, and had merged

that land with his own to create the extensive gardens that are now connected with his house.

The Sumner Wallace House on Main Street, which had a very large lot that extended behind Dr. Roberts' house and eventually became Dr. Roberts' garden, had a brief but apparently interesting history. The house was a very large structure, four or five times the size of an ordinary house. The 1902 Sanborn map indicates the Wallace House as "being built." The map shows that the Wallace House had a two-story semicircular porch on the front, and one-story porches or porte-cocheres on each side. By 1908, the Wallace House had a small garage in its garden, north of the site where the Dr. Roberts House would be built in 1914.

The July 1925 Sanborn Insurance Company map lists the Wallace House as the "K.K.K. [Ku Klux Klan] Klavern." Its garage had grown into a large, rambling building. The Ku Klux Klan was active in the Rochester area during the 1920s; the New Hampshire Historical Society owns a broadside advertising a Fourth of July gathering of the Klan in nearby Farmington in 1926.

The updated Sanborn map of July 1925 shows the Wallace House demolished and replaced by a filling station. The rear half of its garden is shown as having been merged with Dr. Roberts' lot, creating the large polygonal garden now connected with the house. (The southwestern corner of the Wallace lot was subdivided and connected to the house at 17 Academy Street.) The revised 1925 map shows a small structure in Dr. Roberts' garden. Although this could be a remnant of the large garage that had been built behind the Wallace house, it is in a different location. It may have been a garden structure built by Dr. Roberts.

We still lack a full biography of Dr. Walter J. Roberts. According to John Scales' *History of Strafford County, New Hampshire, and Representative Citizens* (1914), Dr. Roberts then maintained an office at 46 Main Street, which is the same building in which he first lived upon his arrival in Rochester in 1907. According to Scales' book, Roberts

was born in York County, Maine, a son of William E. and Cora B. (Carl) Roberts. His father, who was a farmer, is now [1914] living retired at Waterboro, Maine.

W. J. Roberts was educated in the Maine schools and was graduated at the Medical School of Maine in 1905. He spent a year in the Maine General Hospital, where he gained much practical experience and in 1907 came to Rochester, where he bought out the practice of Dr. John H. Neal and has since practiced his profession successfully here. He is medical referee for Strafford county and belongs fraternally to the Masons and Odd Fellows, having membership in the local lodges. He married Idella E. Ross of Phillips, Maine.

Rochester City Directories located thus far extend only through 1941. These directories show that Dr. Roberts continued to be married to Idella ('della) E. Roberts throughout that period.

Dr. Roberts joined the New Hampshire Medical Society in 1914. The Society's annual bulletin may contain a biographical sketch of Roberts at the time of his death, Roberts was still alive in 1952, the date of the last issue of the Medical Society's bulletin located thus far. We therefore need to locate later issues of the bulletin to see if we can learn more about Roberts and his full career.

According to the understanding of the staff at the Strafford Guidance Center, Dr. Roberts eventually sold his house and practice to a Dr. Hoyt. This was probably Dr. Gus Lazare Hoyt, who had established his own medical practice in East Rochester by 1952 and who had joined the New Hampshire Medical Society in 1946.

The Roberts House is a large, framed dwelling with a hipped roof and an extensive yard. The house expresses the colonial revival style in most of its features, but its simple exterior, clad with wooden shingles, also suggests the shingle style. The roof of the main house appears to be covered with cement-asbestos shingles, cut square (check). The roof is pierced by a gabled dormer on the front (south) slope, the western slope, and presumably the eastern slope (check). The house has a broad, one story porch along its southern façade, supported on turned Tuscan columns in pairs. The façade is symmetrical with respect to its central axis, with a double-leaf front door in the center and gently-swelling curved bays at the front walls of all four front rooms, two on the first floor and two above. The windows in the more prominent rooms are large and are filled with 15-over-1 sashes. Many of the windows appear to have been fitted with awnings and retain some awning hardware.

The house has two large brick chimneys; that on the west providing a fireplace for the first-story room to the left of the stairhall and that to the right, set farther back (northerly) on the roof, providing a fireplace for a room on the first floor and the conservatory on the second (see below).

There is a more recent extension off the northwestern corner, used by Dr. Roberts or by his successor, Dr. Hoyt, as a medical office. This is a one-story ell whose rear wall is aligned with the rear wall of the house. The office has a separate door that is reached by a pathway from the front gate of the yard. A modern shed-roofed patio, probably dating from the 1960s, extends behind the house. Defined by a low wall built of a variety of stones, including rose quartz, the patio is sheltered by a shed roof composed of simple 4"x4" posts supporting a roof of translucent Onduline.

As noted above, the yard is large, of irregular outline (see the updated 1925 Sanborn Insurance Company maps), and is richly landscaped. Along its eastern border is a line of beech trees. Behind the house is an allee that extends to the northern boundary of the yard. This walkway is paved with nether millstones, set flush with the surface of the soil. About halfway from the house to the northern fence is a group of millstones that form a

circle in the center of which is a shrub, evidently a honeysuckle. The remainder of the yard displays an irregular arrangement of upper millstones that are placed in irregular fashion as seats or perhaps as bases for urns or statuary.

The interior of the house is symmetrical with respect to a central stairhall. The staircase rises along the left-hand (western) wall of the hall and rises to a landing. From the landing, a short stair run extends along the eastern hall wall to the second floor level at the front of the house, while a second short run extends northward to a conservatory at the rear of the house, described below. The first-floor newel post is large and square in section, with its faces decorated with neo-Adamesque ornament executed in London putty. Upper angle posts are smaller and are undecorated.

A large opening connects the front portion of the stairhall with a relatively undecorated front parlor to the east; this opening may have been created after the date of construction of the house. Compared to other rooms in the house, the front parlor is relatively plain in its finish. Its main ornamental feature is a heavy ogee crown moulding with enriched decoration. Like all south-facing front rooms, this room has a curved bay window in its front wall.

The room behind the front parlor on the eastern side of the house, which may have been a dining room, is heavily decorated. Its door and window casings have pediments or upper casings with slightly pitched tops and ears at the corners, suggesting the neo-Grec style. The center of each upper casing is decorated with an applied round drawer pull. The elaborate mantelpiece, by contrast, is neo-Adamesque in style, and is richly decorated in London putty. The fireplace has a hearth and jambs of variegated, pinkish marble, and the fireplace has a steel coal grate. The room is lighted by a bank of windows facing east, and by a crystal chandelier and wall sconces with crystal prisms. Like most rooms on the first floor, this room has a ceiling decorated with false beams that extend across the room's width.

Behind this room, apparently extending across the rear of the house, is a kitchen (not seen).

On the left (west) of the stairhall are two smaller rooms. The front room, entered through a two-panel door and now used as a receptionist's office, has a fireplace with a rococo mantelpiece. Apparently executed in wood, this richly-carved feature has a coating of gesso with polychrome paint over the gesso. This room has a ceiling decorated with false beams.

Behind the front room on the west is a smaller rear room. Although this room now has a modern dropped ceiling, its wall decoration remains intact and depicts Oriental scenes. Like the rooms of lesser pretension elsewhere in the house, this room has five-panel doors.

On the second floor, both front rooms have south-facing bay windows. The front room on the west has casings that are decorated with London putty ornament in an Adamesque

style. Its woodwork is now painted in polychrome over a white background, but an examination of the baseboard and door to the hallway suggests that an earlier color was dark green, perhaps in the form of graining. This room has Chinese wallpaper decorated with birds, flowers, and trees. This paper appears to be hand-painted, but perhaps has an over-painted background. The paper seems to be fabricated in rolls rather than sheets, and therefore may be turn-of-the-century paper. This room has a chandelier and matching wall sconces in the location of a bureau on the western wall.

Behind this room, in the middle of the house, is a bathroom with what appear to be an original cast iron tub, sitz bath, and pedestal sink; the water closet is new. The walls are tiled in a pink tile from floor to ceiling, and the ceiling is a shallow plastered cove above a foliate frieze that appears to be composed of moulded tiles. The bathroom has an enclosed shower with multiple shower heads at varying levels, and a ground glass door with chrome-plated frame and an open grille at the top to release steam.

The front bedchamber at the southeast corner is not a mirror image of the one on the southwest. While it has a bowed front window, it lacks a double-hung window on the side (eastern) wall. Rather, there is a fixed sash set rather high up on this wall, somewhat toward the rear wall of the room. Evidence on the exterior casing suggests that this window originally had an awning. A rectangular bed tester is fixed to the ceiling of the room against the eastern wall, partly overlapping this fixed window. The valances of this tester hide curtain rods for bed curtains that once extended across the head of the now-missing bedstead and along the two short sides of the tester. It appears that the window and tester were specifically designed to allow part of the bed to have natural light when wanted.

A bedchamber lies behind this front bedroom in the center of the eastern side of the house. A closet between the doors to the two eastern bedrooms contains built-in drawers for linens, and also has a trap door leading to the attic. We did not examine the attic to determine whether a more accessible access to the space was once available, but such a relatively high and well-lighted attic space would normally have easier access than a small trap door in a closet.

The entire expanse of the rear of the house on the second floor is given over to a room in the Tudor style, reached by a short run of stairs ascending from the landing of the main staircase. The room is thought to have been a musical conservatory. The walls of the room are sheathed in unpainted linenfold panels. The windows, most of which look out over the extensive gardens north of the house, have casement sashes filled with leaded glass. A few selected panels in the sashes are panes of stained or painted glass. The room has a large brick fireplace in the eastern chimney. The fireplace jambs and lintel are limestone or artificial limestone. A hidden door in the linenfold paneling east of the fireplace connects to the middle bedchamber on the eastern side of the house.

It is rare to find such a large and ambitious room in a private home of such modest size. The room is reminiscent of Tudor rooms that were very popular in the wealthier American colleges and private preparatory schools during the early years of the twentieth

century. Since Dr. Roberts was the son of a farmer and did not have a liberal arts education, it seems likely that the character of this room, and of others with unusual and elaborate stylistic vocabularies, were suggested by an architect.

We still do not know the story of the extraordinary decoration that differentiates the house from most others of its period and style. Part of the decoration is presumably original and was probably installed when the building was constructed around 1914. As noted above, an architect may have suggested the strong stylistic character of many of the rooms, which show a full mastery of Adamesque and Tudor styles. These rooms seem to express the original architectural nature of the house: plain on the exterior and more elaborate within. Despite the richness of the interior detailing, however, the fashion of 1914 would ordinarily call for features of this type to have been varnished or painted in plain colors.

Instead, most of the already-elaborate features of the house—notably the Adamesque or rococo mantelpieces—have been painted in polychrome. Even some of the simpler London putty ornamentation, like that seen in the southwest bedchamber at the front of the house, has been over-painted in bright colors. The added brightness and color of much of the woodwork in the building, together with the painted clouds and other frescoed ornaments that decorate some of the ceilings and walls, suggest a later redecoration of a once-subdued interior. The oriental motifs seen in the first-floor room on the west, and in the wallpaper of the southwest bedchamber, are not in keeping with the strong European origins of the motifs expressed in the woodwork of the house.

It has been understood that Dr. Roberts may have had a second or younger wife who redecorated the house. The information given above, however, shows that Dr. Roberts had married Idella Ross of Phillips, Maine, by the time that he built this house. He was still married to his first wife at the eve of World War II. Thus, it appears that the rather exotic redecorating of the house was the work of Dr. and Mrs. Roberts, or of one of them, during the period between the two world wars. Perhaps some of this transformation of the interior was done after 1925, when the Roberts property was expanded greatly through the purchase and demolition of a house next door and through the purchase of the extensive lot to the north.

Further investigation may shed more light on the story. Still to be checked are obituaries of Dr. and Mrs. Roberts, as well as further information on Dr. Gus Lazare Hoyt, who later acquired the property.