

Item #12



**State Historic  
Preservation Office**



**DECD**  
State of Connecticut  
Department of Economic and  
Community Development

June 7, 2012

Mr. Stephen L. Bishop, Esq.  
Chair, Greenwich Historic District Commission  
101 Field Point Road  
Greenwich, CT 06830

Re: Proposed Historic Property Designation: Town of Greenwich

Dear Mr. Bishop:

I am pleased to inform you that at its June 6, 2012 meeting, the Historic Preservation Council voted unanimously to recommend approval of the study report submitted by the Town of Greenwich Historic District Commission for the proposed Historic Property, 516 Lake Avenue (also known as French Farm), in the Town of Greenwich.

The council was pleased to support this designation and commends the town for taking steps to protect and preserve this irreplaceable historic and architectural resource.

Please keep me informed of the progress of this designation. In the meantime if you have any questions regarding this notification, please feel free to contact me at (860) 256-2756.

Sincerely,

Mary Dunne  
Architectural Historian

*Item #12*

# FRENCH FARM

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## Narrative

**Nils Kerschus**

**1/31/2011**

Narrative submitted by Nils Kerschus for David R.A. Wierdsma for French Farm, 516 Lake Avenue,  
Greenwich, CT

## DESCRIPTION

French Farm, in its present incarnation, consists of 4.228 acres that contain the farm complex built during the ownership of Mary M. Billings French, soon after she bought the 44-acre estate of Henry W. Lanier in 1911. The property is located two miles north of Greenwich Town Hall, situated on the west side of Lake Avenue, just north of the original estate's main house, built for Mr. Lanier in 1906. To the west is conservation land owned by the Greenwich Land Trust and to the north is one of the other lots subdivided from the estate. The topography is gently rolling, averaging 240' above sea level (photograph 2).

The eastern boundary, running due north, is marked by a stone wall running alongside Lake Avenue and interrupted by the north and south entrances of the property's driveway. Just inside the wall is a row of large trees, mostly Norway maples but including white pines near the northern end of the wall, adjacent to the north entrance. From the south entrance, located approximately at the midpoint of the eastern boundary, the driveway proceeds in a southwesterly direction, initially downslope from Lake Avenue and then shaded by red maples. On the north side, near the entrance, is an upright shaft of stone originating in China (photograph 3). To the north is the meadow, left unmowed to supply seeds for passing birds (photographs 4 & 5). Approaching the rear of the farm complex, the driveway passes a patio of millstones just to the northwest, one of the millstones functioning as a table supported by a stone pedestal (photographs 7 & 10). The driveway turns south after the gated entrance to the complex and proceeds past an elliptical flagstone terrace located near a magnolia tree and presided over by a black Linghi stone (photographs 11 - 13). To the southeast is a bald cypress, growing near the southern boundary and surviving far north of its natural range (photograph 14). The driveway then curves to the west, intersecting with the parking court that originally marked the service driveway's confluence with the driveway to the main house to the south, now on a separate lot. The driveway then turns due north, proceeding through the middle of the farm complex, which consists of six buildings: the cottage, stable/greenhouse, farmhouse, cow barn, poultry house and toolhouse (photographs 29 & 30).

The complex's principal building is the cottage, originally the residence of the estate's superintendant but also used by the owners as a guest house. It faces south, overlooking the parking court and originally service as the vista termination for the driveway leading to the main house as well as the visual link between the house and the complex, its domestic appearance softening the transition to the following utilitarian structures. The cottage is essentially a 1 1/2-story, side-gabled dwelling constructed of hollow tile covered with white-painted stucco. This construction and exterior treatment sets the standard for all of the complex's buildings. However, due to its domestic function, the cottage shows more architectural detail. The symmetrical, three-bay façade shows a centrally located front door flanked by sidelights and projecting settles facing each other and showing curved side panels (photograph 17). On either side is an eight-over-eight window equipped with paneled shutters featuring fleur-de-lis cutouts (photograph 18). Extending across the top of the first story and continuing down the east and west edges is a band of applied wooded trelliswork, a reoccurring theme in the complex and the only element of the complex also appearing on the estate's original main house. The roofline is distinguished by wide, over-hanging, boxed eaves that continue across the side elevations as pent roofs. Lighting the second story are three

gabled, wood-shingled dormers, each showing cornice trim with incomplete returns that accommodate an arched window with a prominent keystone and muntins of Gothic tracery distinguishing the upper sash (photograph 16). The side elevations show high gables that enclose the second story as well as a full attic story, the latter lit by a half-round window on either side. The west elevation features an off-side chimney, also covered with white-painted stucco, that interrupts the pent roof (photograph 19). To the far left, the first story shows a recessed corner porch, enclosed with French doors and supported at the corner by a massive round column (photograph 21).

The rear (north) elevation is asymmetrical in design, dominated by a slightly projecting, cross-gabled wing to the left which interrupts the overhanging eave. To the right projects a single dormer identical to those of the façade (photographs 21 & 23). Returning to the façade of the cottage, its front yard shows several large quartz stones while the southeast corner of the parking court and driveway is shaded by an immense linden, probably planted when the cottage was built and therefore over 100 years old (photographs 25 & 26). Facing the driveway, the eastern elevation reveals the cut-granite foundation and shows more applied trelliswork (photograph 27). To the right, shaded by a tall shagbark hickory, the entrance to the rear yard is sheltered by an arched trellis enclosing a gateway accented with a large circular opening complementing the arch (photograph 28).

Located opposite the cottage's east elevation, on the east side of the driveway, is the 1 ½-story, side-gabled stable. The front (west) and rear elevations each show an off-center stable doorway, the front-doorway retaining its sash doors. The façade also features an eight-over-eight window to the far right (photograph 31). The stuccoed masonry walls of the front and rear elevations show a band of applied trelliswork similar but broader than that of the cottage while the north and south gables are completely covered with trelliswork. The roofline displays a shallower pitch than that of the cottage and features long, narrow, shed-roofed dormers to the front and rear, both fenestrated with a row of three-over-three windows (photographs 36 & 46). Extending southerly off the south elevation is a greenhouse, added in 1947 (photograph 34). The interior of the stable contains a wide variety of antiques, mostly of the folk art variety, including a collection of milk bottles and figurines of various domestic animals (photographs 37 - 40).

Extending northerly from the stable's rear wall is a tall masonry wall that connects to the farmhouse but is penetrated by a gateway marked by overly tall gateposts crowned with squirrel figurines (photographs 36, 41 and 46). The farmhouse is set back beyond the stable, allowing for a landscaped front yard shaded by a large pin oak (photograph 43). Originally a garage including living quarters, the farmhouse primarily consists of a cube-shaped, one-story structure surmounted with a pyramidal roof crowned with an octagonal, bell-roofed vent. Its white, stuccoed walls are framed by prominent corner pilasters and a wide entablature that surrounds the building. Its fenestration consists of casement windows, including a three-unit window facing north but excepting the south elevation which features a large window to the far left which appears to have replaced the original garage door (photographs 45 & 47). A hip-roofed rear wing features trelliswork of a complex design, employing diagonal members (photograph 51).

Another tall masonry wall connects the farmhouse's east wall with that of the cow barn and also features a gateway marked by tall gateposts but retaining its cut-work gates (photographs 45 & 52). The driveway between the two structures has been replaced by a grass mall partially "paved" by three inlaid millstones that lead to the millstone terrace on the other side of the gateway (photograph 50). The 1 ½-story, side gabled cow barn runs parallel to the driveway. Its south gable, showing incomplete cornice returns, features a holst and a loft door facing the former driveway (photographs 50 & 58). The structure's stuccoed walls are otherwise fenestrated with casement windows. The roof is surmounted by an octagonal, vented cupola similar to that of the farmhouse but slightly larger (photographs 53 & 55). Attached to the west elevation is a silo constructed of sheet metal encircled by steel cable bands and capped by a conical roof consisting of a lower, steeply pitched, wood-shingled section and an upper, shallow-pitched section crowned by a conical ventilator cap (photograph 58). The cow barn's interior retains its original wrought-iron cow stalls including elaborate feeding trays and a sophisticated manure removal system (photographs 59-62). Also present are several antique carousel figurines (photograph 54). The barn faces a barnyard enclosed by a chain-link fence. Bordering it to the north is a larger enclosure for the poultry house, confined by a similar but taller fence. Enclosing the north end is the poultry house, a long, one-story, shed roofed structure that faces south, where it shows paired casement windows (several replaced) and three single French doors (photograph 57). The interior houses a poultry museum in the western section while the remainder is occupied by the remaining representatives of the owners' formerly extensive collection of exotic poultry (photographs 65-70). The driveway continues northerly and turns to the east, passing the compost heap and garden pens before terminating at the northern entrance to Lake Avenue.

On the west side of the driveway a low stone wall connects the cottage with the toolhouse, a long one-story, side-gabled structure shaded by a large Norway maple at its south and located opposite the farmhouse (photograph 42 & 75). The southern end consists of a corn crib, the roof supported by boxed posts flanked at the top by curvilinear brackets of the same thickness and enclosed to the south and east by horizontally slatted wooden screens. The adjacent, three-bay, open shed is supported by boxed posts identical to those of the corn crib while the northern end is completely enclosed by masonry walls and occupied by the tool room and workshop (photograph 71). The entire rear (west) elevation consists of a stuccoed masonry wall completely covered with applied trelliswork and fenestrated with casement windows at the north end (photograph 22). The roofline displays a clapboard gable at the north and south ends, each rising above an overhanging pent roof similar to that of the cottage (photograph 75). The interior of the open shed contains a collection of antique farm implements (photographs 72-74).

To the north of the toolhouse an opening in the stone wall allows entry to a path that runs along the property's northern, western, and southern boundaries and functions as a tour of the current owner's artwork, essentially composed of a variety of recycled materials originating off-site. The path proceeds northwesterly, through a grove of very tall white pines, easily over 100 feet in height. Dominating the grove is the Pterodactyl Tower, a round, two-story folly constructed of cut stones salvaged from a demolished New York brownstone, and crowned by a tangled mass of thick vines symbolizing the nest of said prehistoric creature (photographs 8, 76 & 77). The path intersects with a mall that extends from the

lawn to the northern property line where it is marked by an arched mirror placed between scored, cut-stone piers spanned by a recycled stone arch (photograph 82). The entrance to the path leading from the Pterodactyl Tower is flanked by stone piers surmounted by curvilinear stone corbels (photograph 77). The path continues westerly through the conifer garden, past an antique wrought-iron crib containing a row of doll's arms and bracketing a row of doll's heads (photograph 80). To the west is a circle of up-right, petrified logs surrounding a tableau of mannequin torsos, male and female (photograph 81). The path continues southerly along the western boundary distinguished by a row of very old cherry trees among which appears an antique, wrought-iron kiosk (photograph 84). The path then approaches a circular garden, composed of alternating raised dykes and canals, and proceeds through the sanctuary, a short mall lined with bamboo that focuses on a root cellar consisting of an elliptical-arched fieldstone retaining wall facing a complimentary semi-elliptical terrace accented by two tall urns that flank the centrally placed entrance to the root cellar (photographs 85, 88-91). The path then continues through the property's southwest corner, past a number of stone slabs pierced by round holes and then proceeds easterly, past another grove of tall white pines before terminating at the cottage's parking court (photograph 86).

#### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

French Farm is historically significant as one of the few intact farm complexes that have survived from the "Great Estates" era which has essentially personified the Town of Greenwich as a whole. This period, which lasted roughly between 1880 and 1930, gentrified a large portion of the town, virtually eliminating its traditional landscape of subsistence farms and replacing it with a rural ideal created by wealthy New Yorkers who desired a country retreat. This gentrification can be divided into two basic types: the "planned" communities or subdivisions, with lots ranging between a half-acre and ten acres, and the gentlemen's farms, generally over ten acres, the largest exceeding one thousand acres. Apart from this basic difference in size, the most obvious distinction between the two types is the presence of farm animals in the gentlemen's farms and their absence in planned communities such as Belle Haven because of deed restrictions, farm animals on these smaller lots constituting a nuisance factor. By the end of this period (1930), Greenwich could count over 130 gentleman's farms, not counting the few remaining traditional farms where the owner actually derived his living from the farm or was one of the "landed gentry", affluent families that dated back to the Colonial period but no longer derived their income primarily from the family farm.

French Farm was the country retreat of John French (1864-1935), a prominent New York lawyer, and his wife Mary Montagu Billings French (1869-1951), president of the YWCA and daughter of Frederick Billings, a founder and early president of the Northern Pacific Railroad. They bought the 44-acre estate in 1911 from Henry W. Lanier, son of the poet Sidney Lanier, and his wife Josephine Stevens Lanier. A writer and editor, Lanier commissioned the construction of the estate's main house, carriage house and hay barn in 1906. H. Van Buren Magonigle, the architect who designed the existing main house, was selected by the Frenches to design a compact farm complex between the house and the existing outbuildings further to the north. Although the National Register dates the complex's main buildings to 1911, assessment records and a newspaper article state that the cottage, garage (farmhouse) and stable

were constructed in 1912. Although listed in assessment records as the superintendant's house, the building was also used by the owners as a guest cottage. The other buildings, being more utilitarian in function, were not assigned construction dates, so c.1915 is given as an estimated date. Because of their expensive hollow-tile construction, it is apparent that they were probably built in the same year or shortly thereafter. Assessment records also reveal the number of taxable animals on the property generally ranging from two to three horses and five to six cows. Magonigle also designed the landscaping for the estate, reflecting his training under Calvert Vaux. On this remaining segment of the farm the most visible aspect of this design is the presence of tall white pines, along with the several Norway spruce, which form several groves. The agricultural function of the property's design is revealed by cherry trees near the western boundary and apple trees located near the meadow. The corn crib section of the toolhouse shows that corn was being grown for grain, stored on site, and used for animal feed.

In 1945 the estate was sold to Nathan Allen (1901-1971), owner of an investment business in New York. During his ownership and that of his wife, Elizabeth Trinkner Allen and his step-son, David R.A. Wierdsma, the property has evolved from a typical gentleman's farm to the more personalized statement of the latest owner, Mr. Wierdsma. This evolution can be traced back to the construction of the greenhouse in 1947, attached to the south end of the stable and built by the firm of Lord & Burnham, renowned builders of greenhouses. This evolution has tended, in general, towards the exotic, greatly increasing the number and variety of plants and animals. The plants include tender species, seasonally confined to the greenhouse, exotic vegetables grown during the summer, and a dwarf conifer nursery. The animals have included a black sheep and a pot-bellied pig but the most significant collection has been that of exotic poultry, including chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, pheasants, peafowl, and quail, at one point reaching 200 birds in 50 varieties.

In addition to this expanded version of the gentleman's farm, the property has been modified by several more tangential themes. The one related to the farm's agricultural function includes a collection of various agricultural objects including a veritable museum of farm implements housed in the toolhouse, a poultry museum located in the west end of the poultry house, a milk bottle collection housed in the stable, and a number of millstones used as landscape elements. The importance of agriculture as a life-sustaining force is symbolized by the sanctuary, the bamboo-lined mall focusing on the elliptical-arched root cellar, the entrance framed by large urns giving it the appearance of a prehistoric temple. The more fanciful theme is represented by objects recycled from origins off-site and arranged in a variety of artistic formats including the Pterodactyl Tower, constructed from the remains of a New York brownstone, a group of mannequin torsos, an antique crib with doll arms and heads, a tall arched mirror, assorted logs of petrified wood and a variety of upright shafts of stone.

#### ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Architecturally, French Farm is significant for its overall effect – that of a harmonious farmscape in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The six buildings form a compact and well-proportioned complex that appears to have evolved over a number of years but in fact was deliberately designed as

such by the architect, who used a variety of roof treatments and building placements united by common exterior treatments and building construction. The buildings are arranged along the service driveway or "main street", showing a variety of setbacks that form an irregular, semi-enclosed space, aided by high gated walls connecting three of the buildings. The primary common element is the white, stuccoed walls of all six buildings, constructed of hollow-tile, a relatively expensive choice in purely domestic examples and exceptional for utilitarian structures (the main house, on a neighboring lot, is wood-framed). Another reoccurring feature is the use of applied trelliswork, used as a framing element in the cottage and more extensively in the stable, toolhouse and the farmhouse's rear wing. Probably because of its purely domestic function, the cottage features a number of stylistic details, mostly in the Colonial Revival mode, including pent roofs (also appearing on the toolhouse), rather elegant gabled dormers lit by arched windows with tracery; paneled shutters with fleur-de-lis cut-outs; and an arched trellis enclosing a gateway pierced by a large circle complementing the arch. The massive round column supporting the building's northwest corner is a Craftsman element. The farmhouse is notable for the classicism evident in its prominent corner pilasters and continuous entablature. Other notable stylistic accents include the octagonal, bell-roofed cupolas crowning the farmhouse and the cow barn; the curvilinear brackets ornamenting the posts supporting the toolhouse's open sections, a Spanish Colonial element; and the cutwork gate adjacent to the cow barn.

The architect of French Farm was Henry Van Buren Magonigle (1867-1935) who received his training both at the firm of McKim Mead & White and Calvert Vaux. His best known works include Mrs. Fox's School; Briarcliff Manor, N.Y. (1902); Arsenal Technical School, Indianapolis, IN; Administration Building, Essex Park, Newark, N.J. (1915); Gates Avenue Courthouse, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Elks Club, Brooklyn, N.Y. (1915, with A.W. Ross); and the U.S. Embassy buildings in Tokyo, Japan. His many domestic commissions include the main house at French Farm, built for the Laniers before the French ownership. His monuments include the Maine memorial at Columbus Circle and Central Park, New York; Fireman's Monument, Riverside Drive, New York; the McKinley Monument, Canton, OH; Schenley Fountain, Pittsburgh, PA; and the Peace Memorial, Kansas City, MO. Magonigle was also an artist and sculptor designing furniture, book and magazine covers, pottery, and the AIA Seal. He also wrote a number of art books such as The Nature, Practice and History of Art, Architectural Renderings in Washington and The Significance of the Fine Arts, which he co-authored. Magonigle was awarded the gold medal by the Architectural League in 1889. This extensive experience in a variety of artistic formats explains his skill in designing French Farm as the epitome of the relaxing rural ideal sought after by the upper class in the "Great Estate" era.

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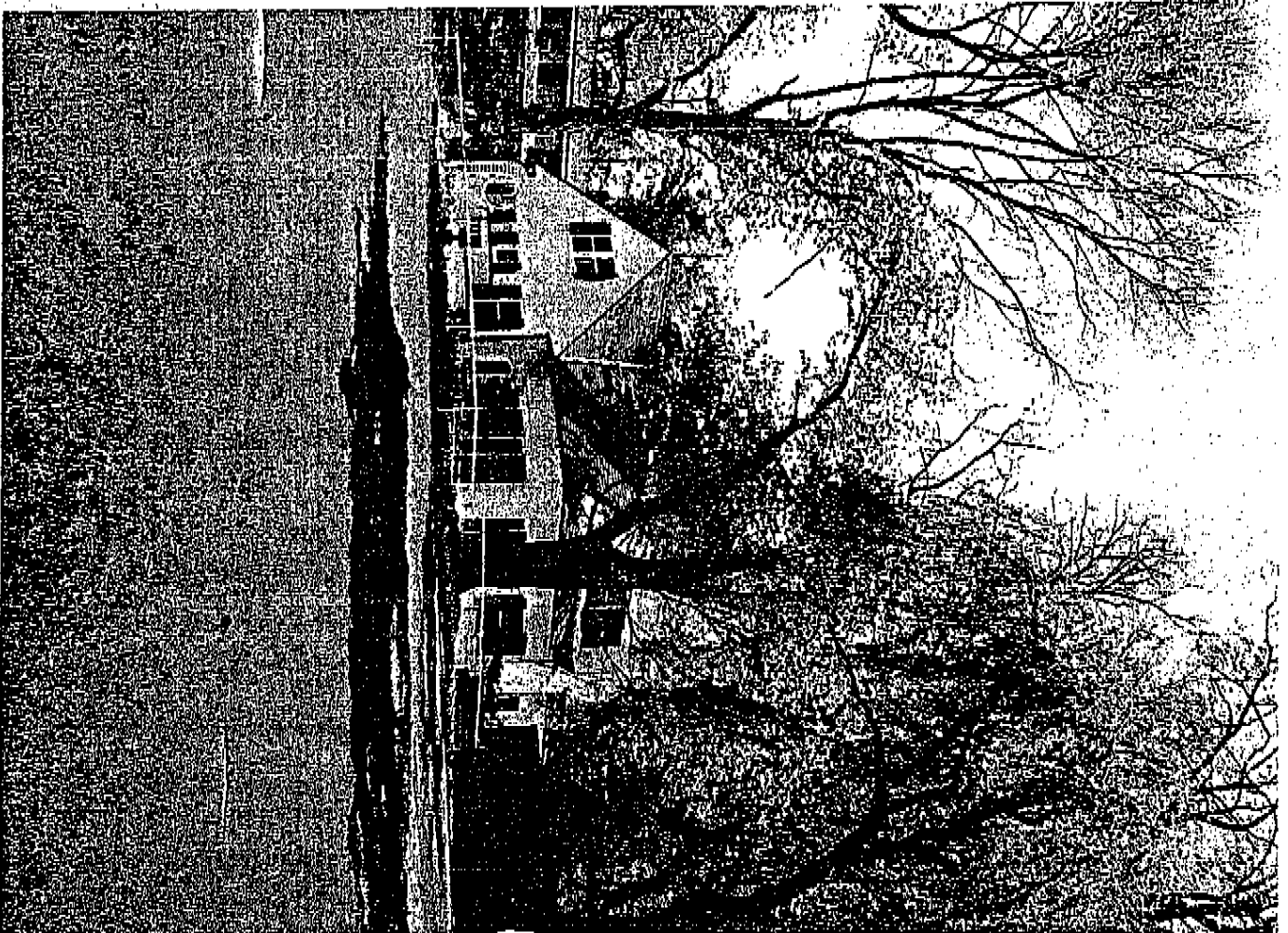
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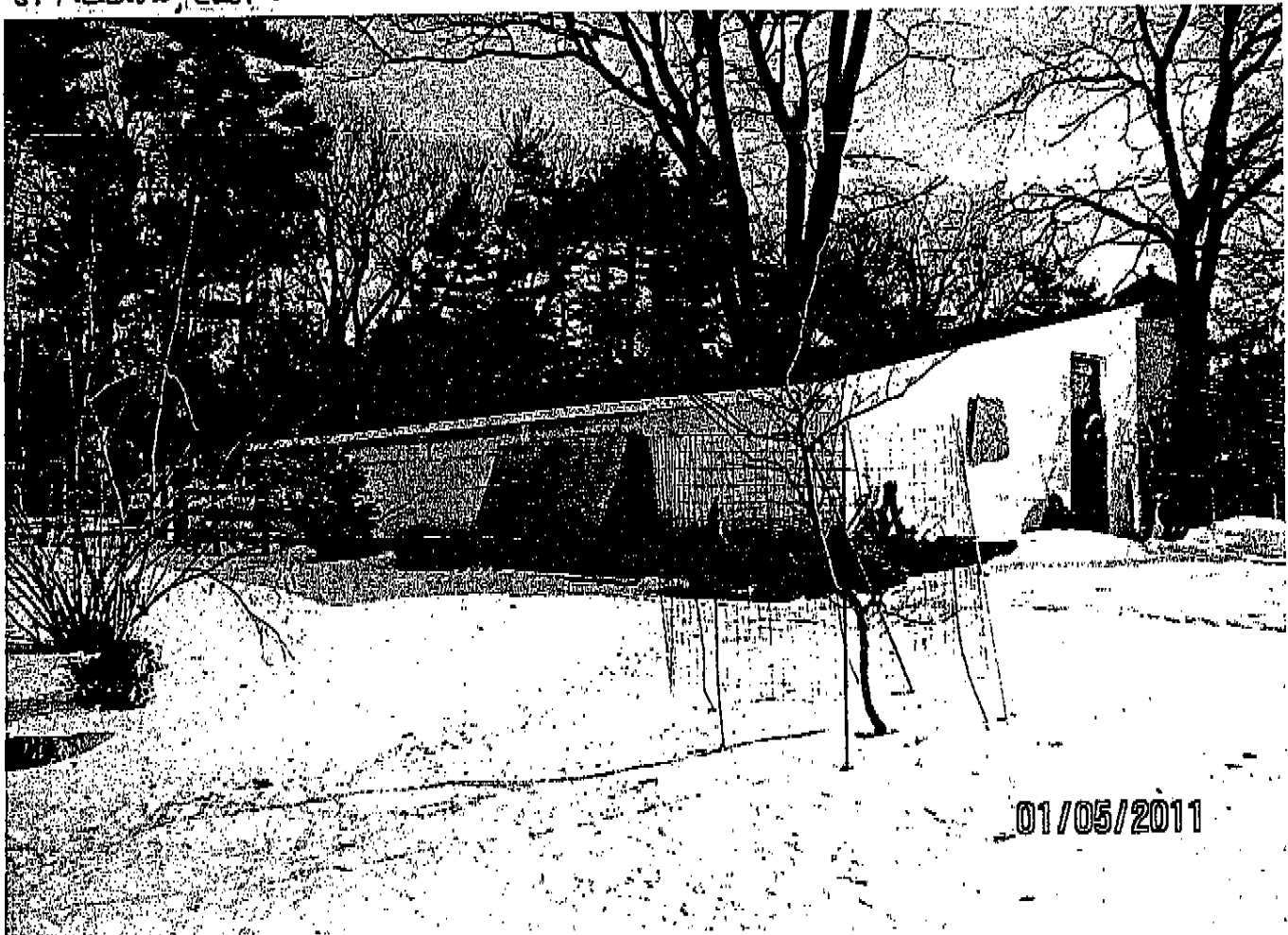
1. Cottage, northwest view



2. Northeast view from north entrance to Lake Avenue



5. Meadow, east view

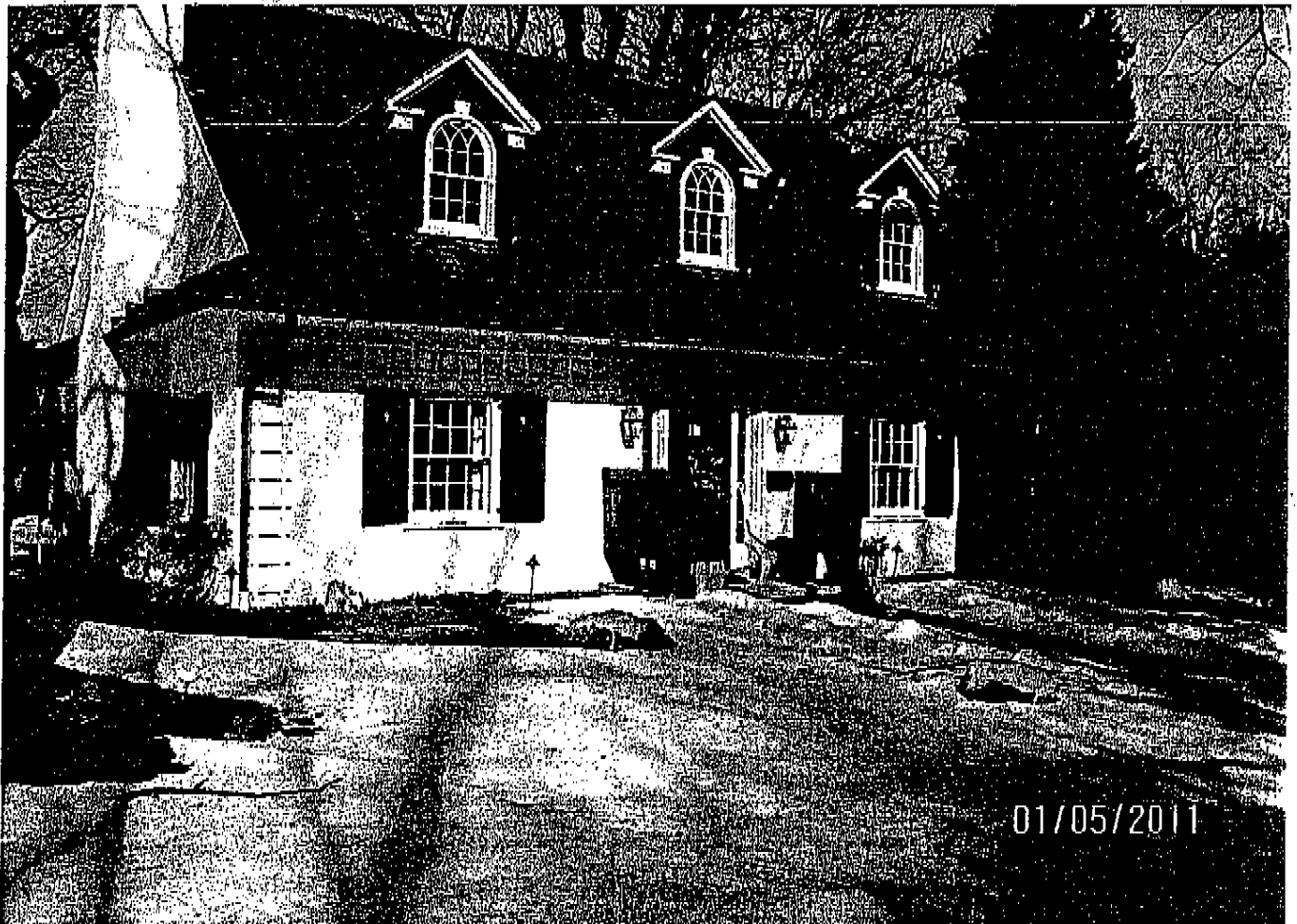


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6. Poultry house, northwest view



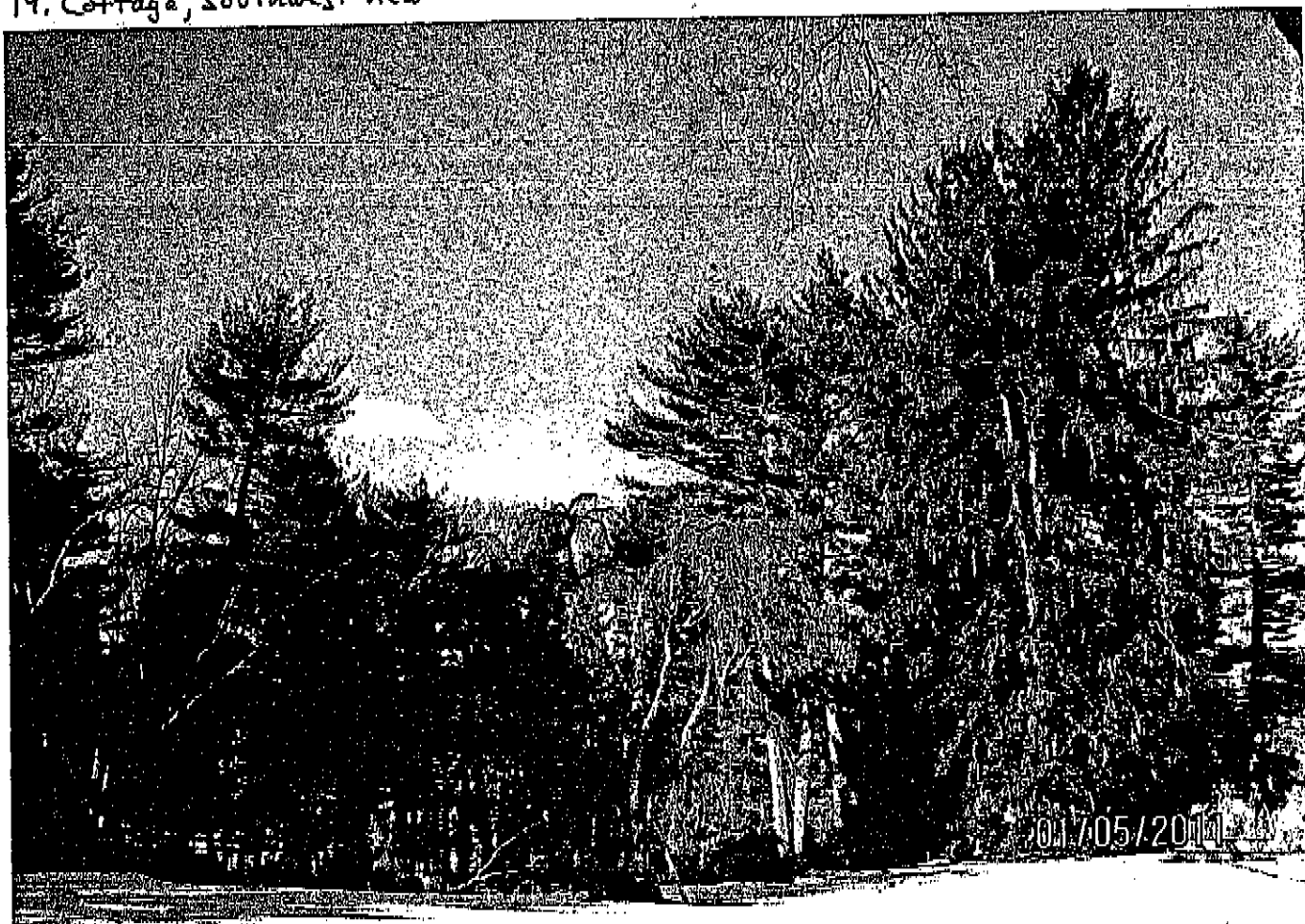
15. Mask on white pine, southeast view



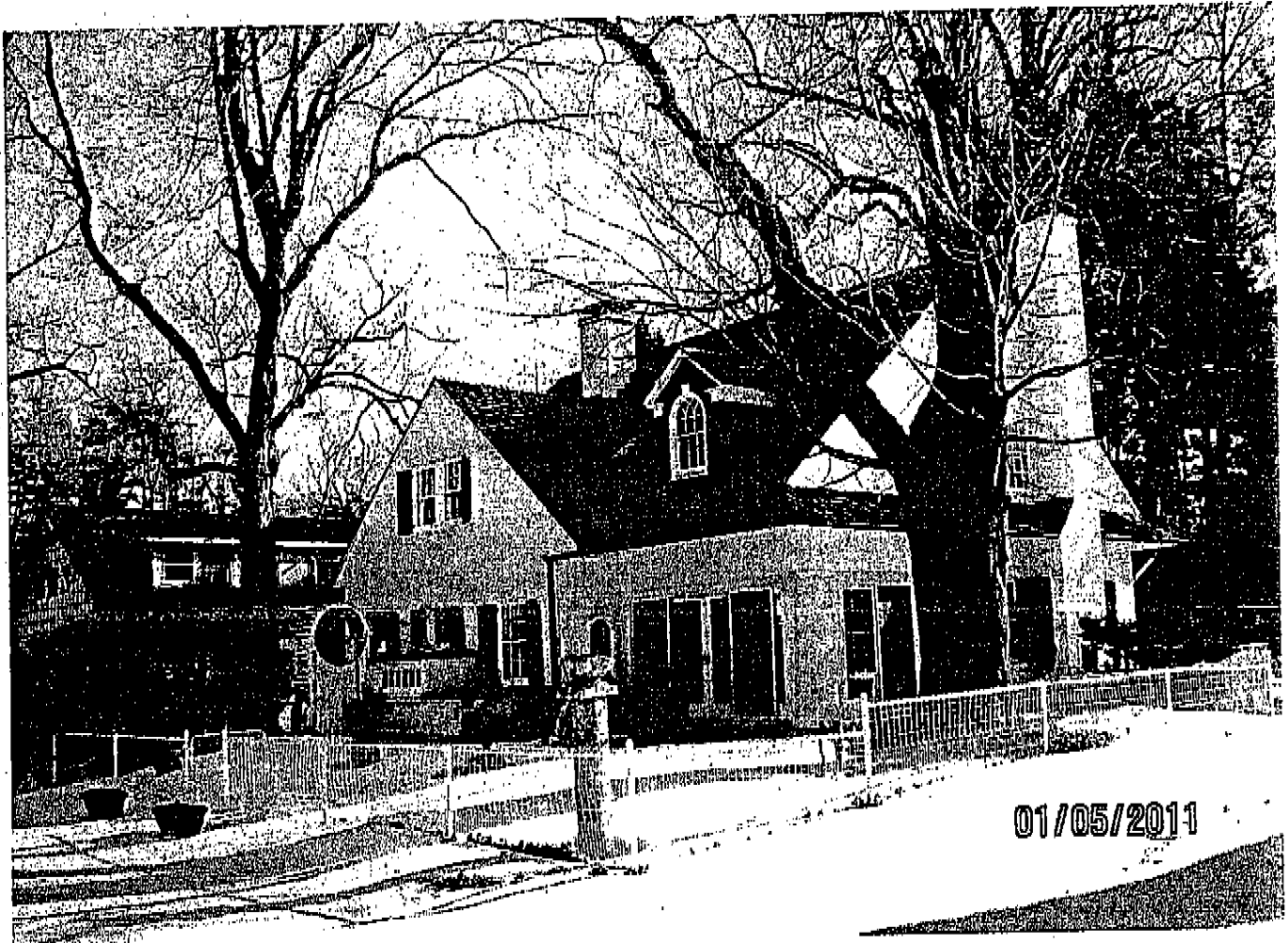
16. Cottage, southwest view



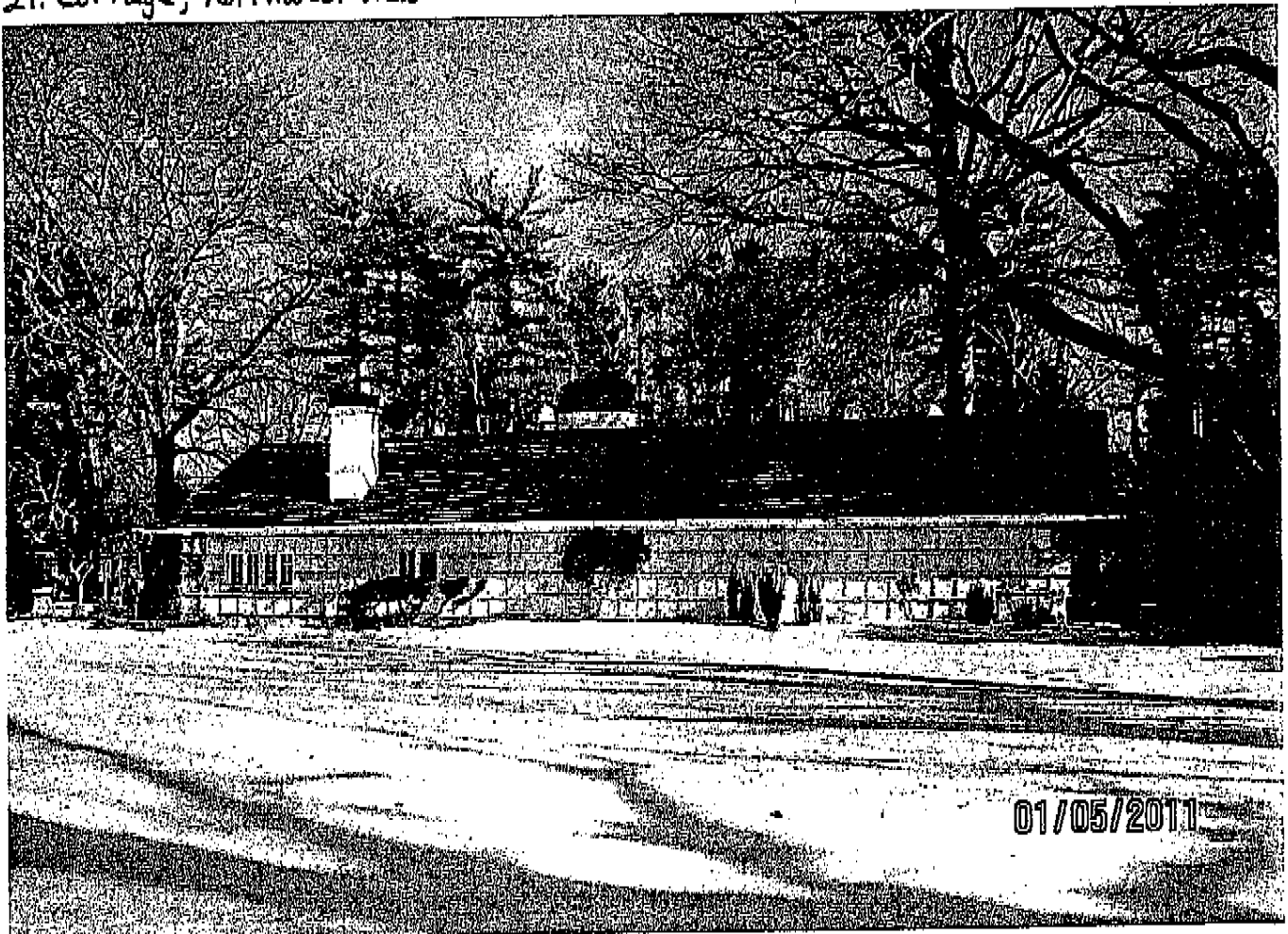
19. Cottage, southwest view



20. White pines & Norway spruce, south view



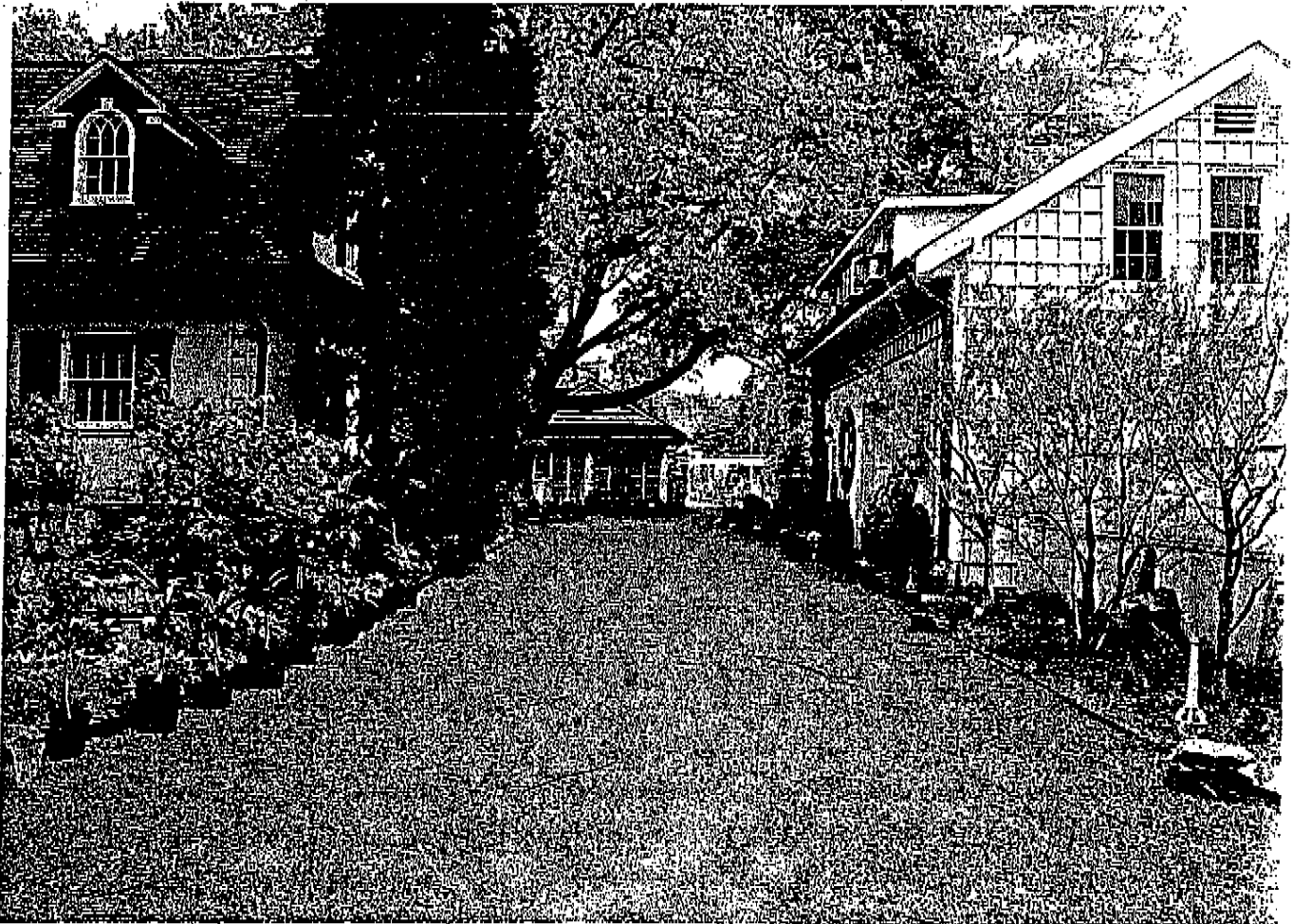
21. Cottage, northwest view



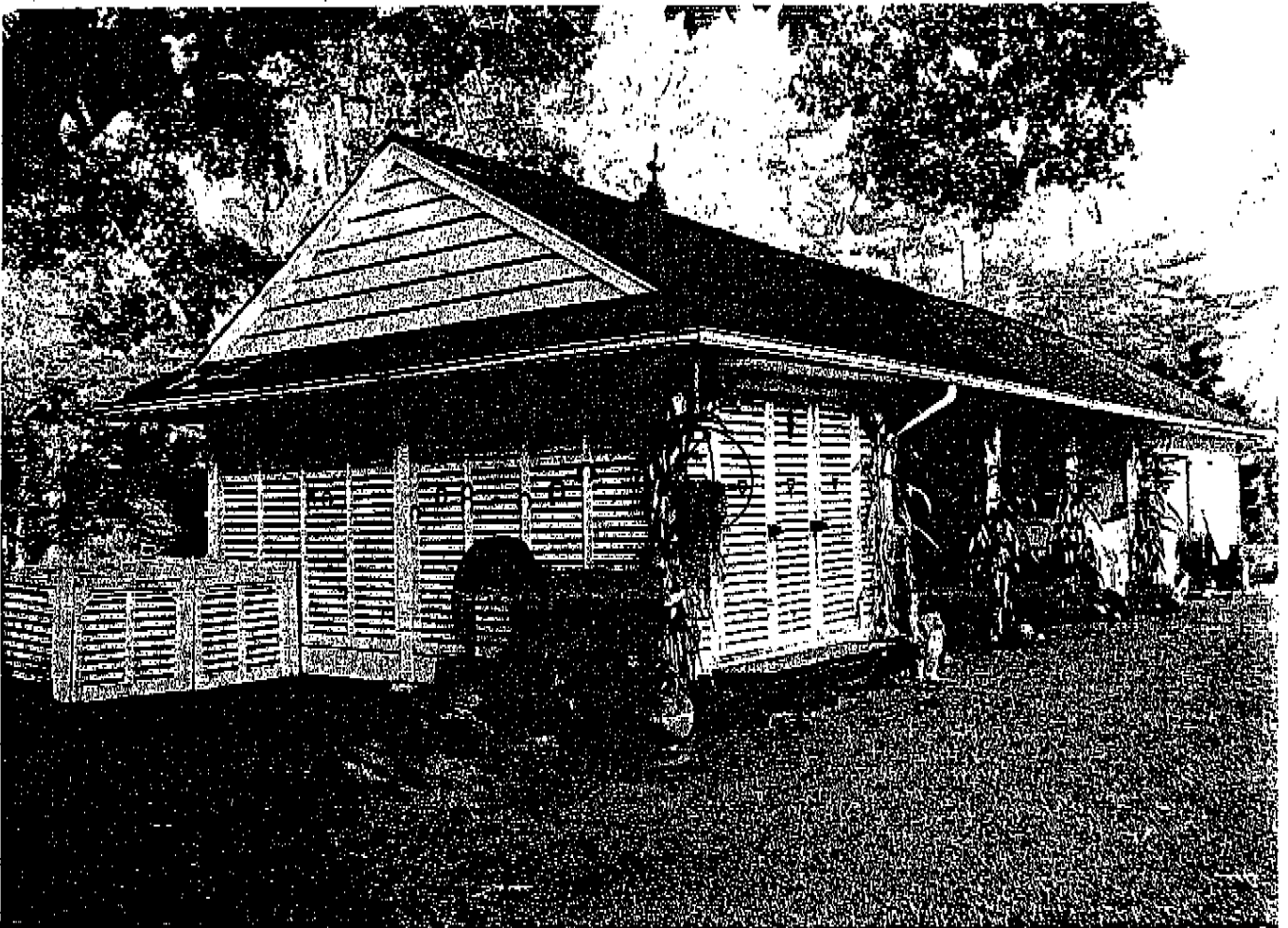
22. Toolhouse, west view



29 DRIVEWAY, SOUTH VIEW



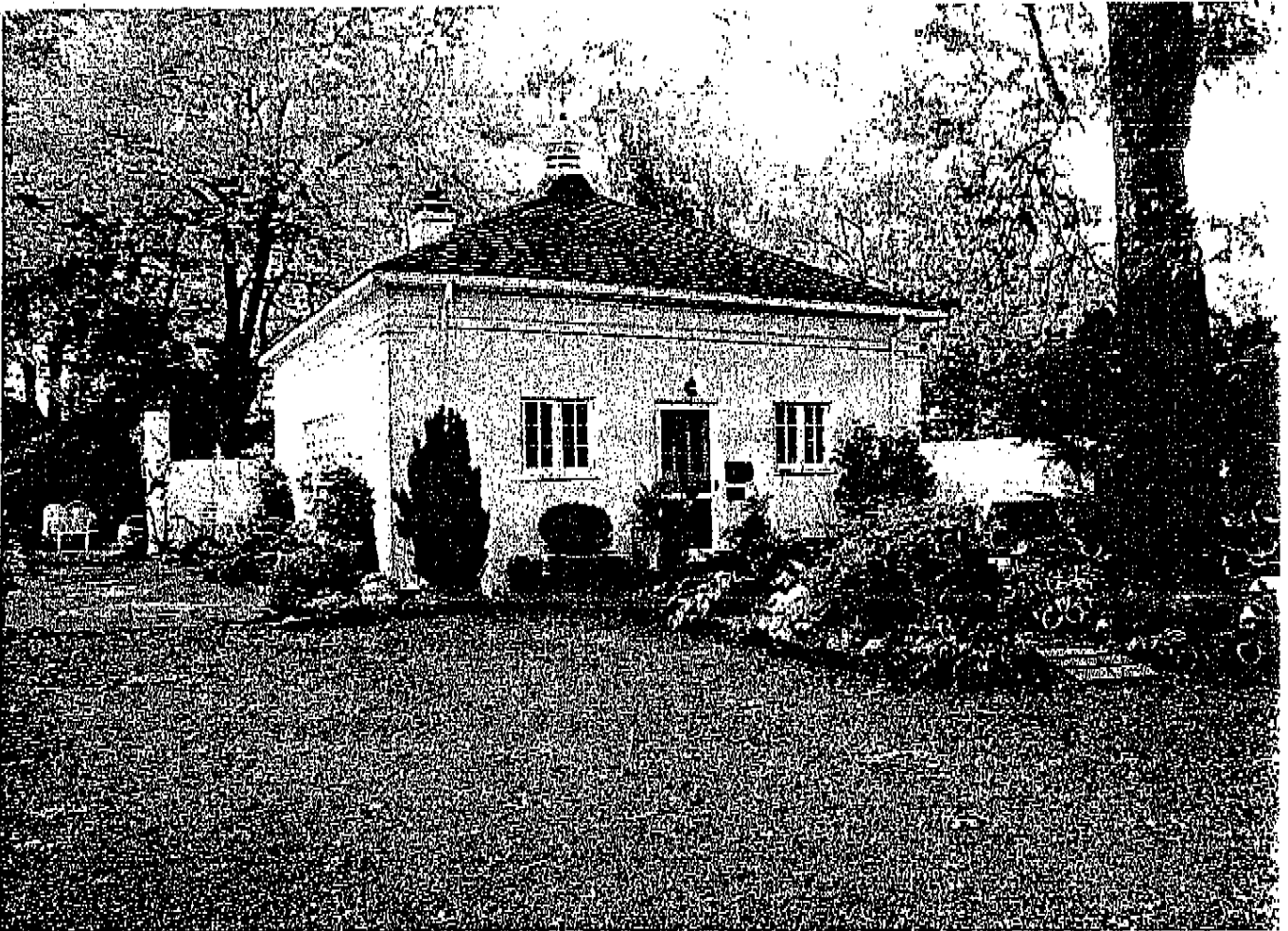
30 DRIVEWAY, NORTH VIEW



33. Toolhouse, corn crib section, southeast view



34. Stable/greenhouse, southwest view



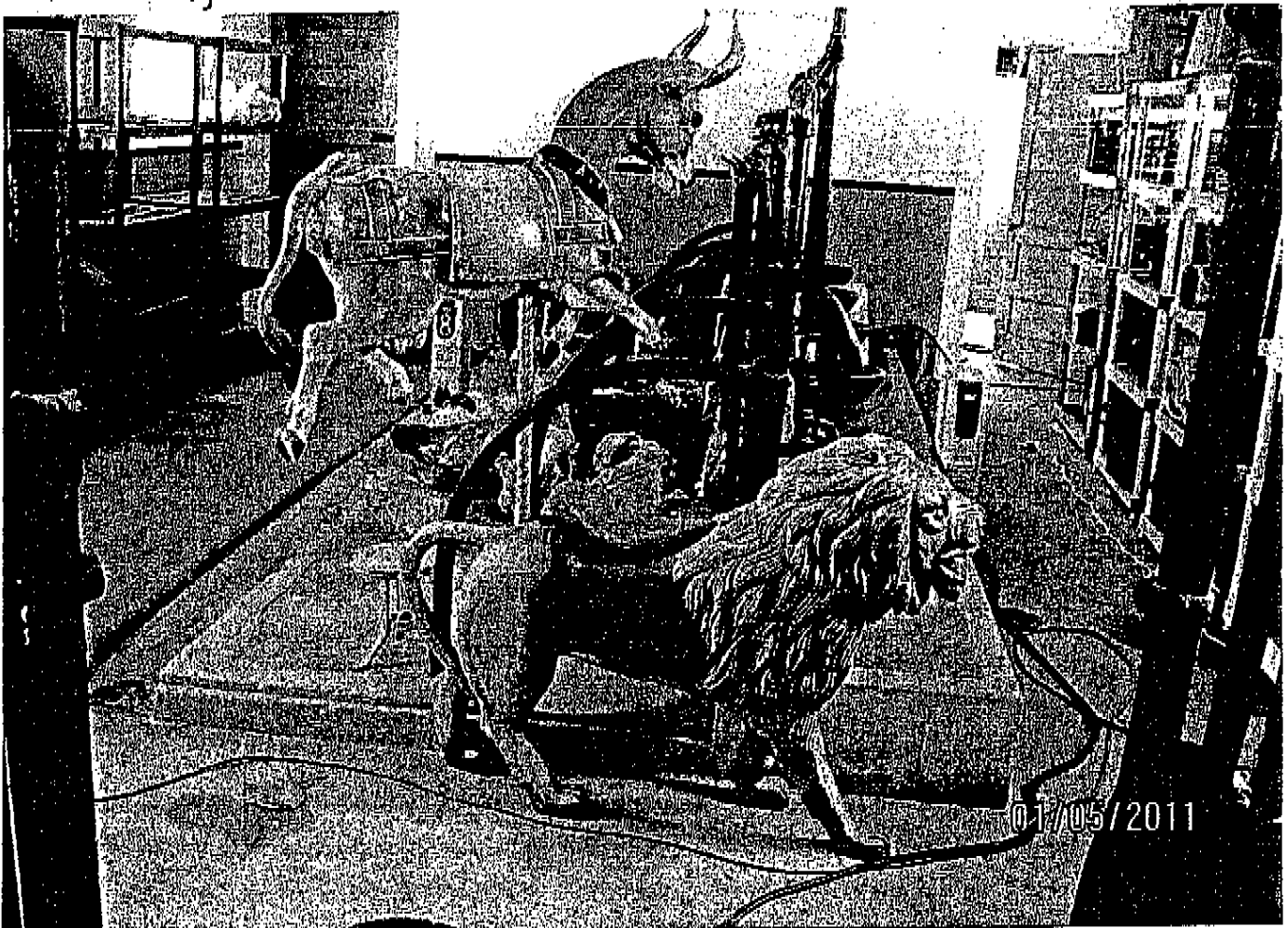
43. Farmhouse, northwest view



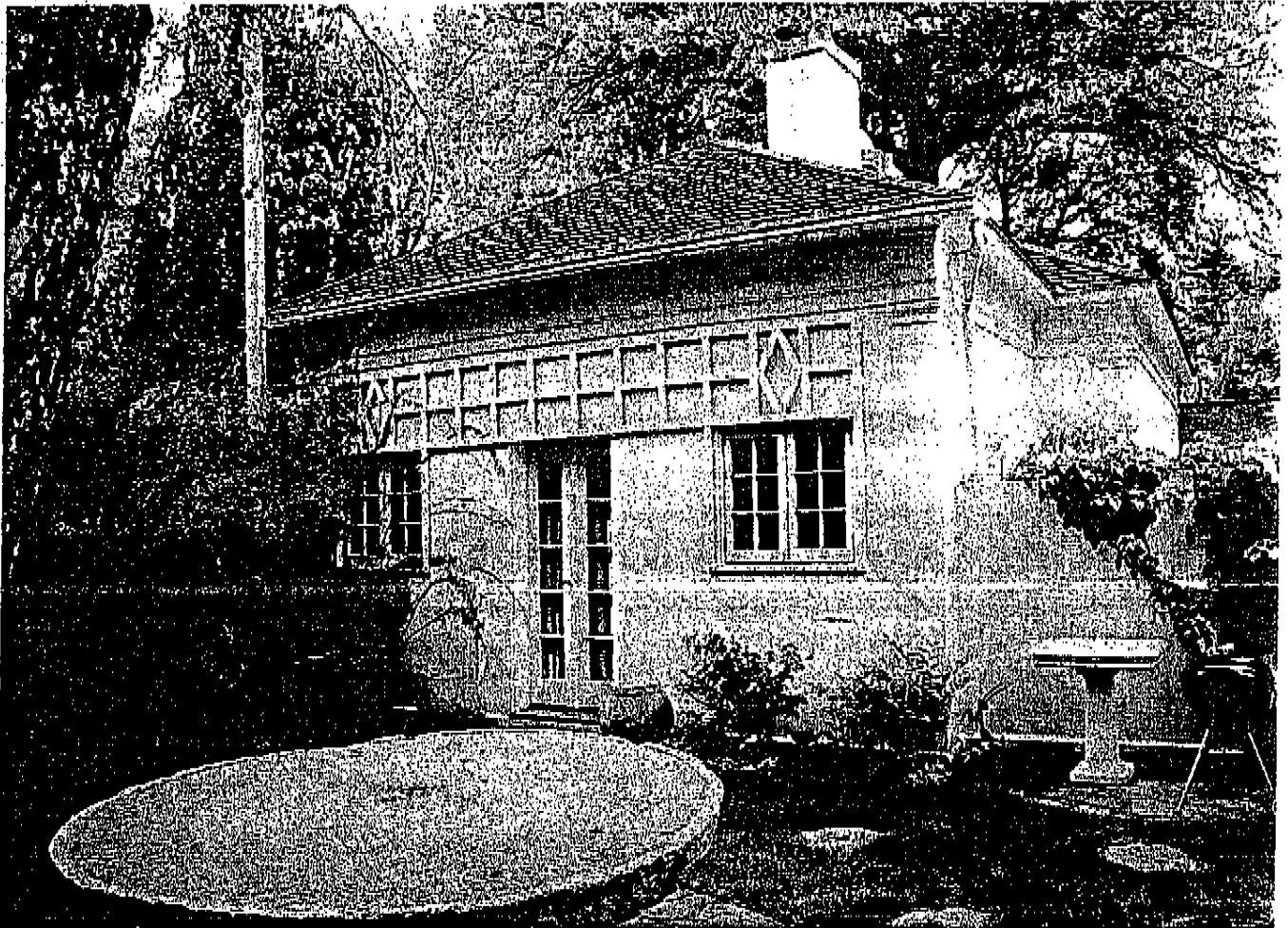
44. Farmhouse & Cow barn, southwest view



53. Cow barn, west view



54. Cow barn interior, north view



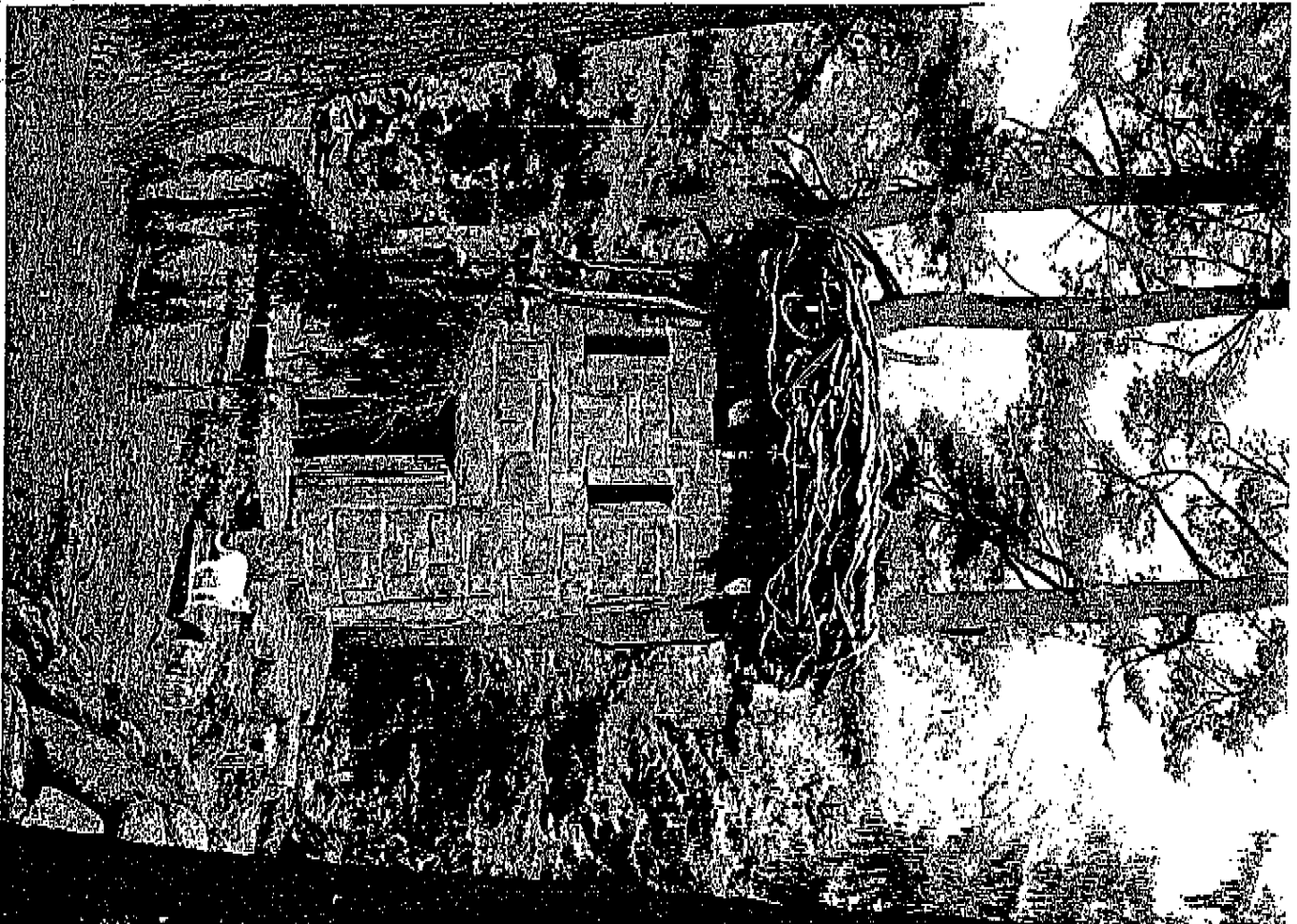
51. FARM HOUSE, EAST VIEW



52. GATE NEXT TO COW BARN, SOUTHWEST VIEW



75. Toolhouse, southeast view



76. Pterodactyl tower, southeast view

