

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

A. EVERETT AUSTIN, JR., HOUSE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 1
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: **A. EVERETT AUSTIN, JR., HOUSE**

Other Name/Site Number: The Austin House

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 130 Scarborough Street

Not for publication: ___

City/Town: Hartford

Vicinity: ___

State: CT

County: Hartford

Code: 003

Zip Code: 06015

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this _____ nomination _____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ____ Entered in the National Register _____
- ____ Determined eligible for the National Register _____
- ____ Determined not eligible for the National Register _____
- ____ Removed from the National Register _____
- ____ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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Page 3**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Domestic

Sub: Single Dwelling

Current: Recreation & Culture

Sub: Museum

7. DESCRIPTIONARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:
Revivals

Late 19th & early 20th Century Revivals/Classical

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Concrete

Walls: Flush Boarding

Roof: Asphalt

Other: Wood/Weatherboard

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Austin House is a two-story, gable-roofed, frame Neo-Classical Revival structure modelled after Vincenzo Scamozzi's 1596 Villa Ferretti at Dolo. The house is sited 260 feet back from the road on 1.82 acres in a fine residential area on the western edge of the city of Hartford, Connecticut. It was the home of A. Everett Austin, Jr., who from 1927-1944 was director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in downtown Hartford, some two miles distant.

The house, only one room deep, is long and narrow, 86 feet in length by 18 feet in depth. In the front elevation, the central three-bay pedimented pavilion is flanked by four-bay wings. The bays are defined by shallow, two-story Ionic pilasters. The walls of the pavilion and wings are in the same plane, since the pavilion does not project. The planar effect is emphasized by the wall sheathing, which is flush boarding, tongue-in-groove. The twelve flat pilasters rise with entasis from bases of double torus moldings to stylized Ionic capitals. Two string courses, one at first-floor ceiling height, the other below second-floor window sills, establish a horizontal orientation to balance the strong upward thrust of the pilasters.

Four stone steps lead up to the double front door in the central bay of the pavilion. Above the door, a balustrade is suggested by half-round, vase-shaped balusters applied to the spandrel under the tall, double round-arched window. First- and second-floor windows in the flanking bays of the pavilion are blind. Windows in the wings are double casements, four panes high at the first floor, three at the second; two are blind at each floor. The pavilion pilasters support a plain architrave and pulvinated frieze. The pediment above is without embellishment in its tympanum, and is wider than the cross gable behind it. The entablature continues under the eaves of the cross-gable roof.

The side elevations of the house articulate its shallow depth. On the south side elevation, a bank of four, single-pane, second-floor windows is entirely different from other fenestration.

Grade falls off to the rear of the grounds, starting at the point where the house is located and continuing down across the back lawn to the north branch of the Park River. A stone terrace, nine feet wide, at first-floor level, looking down over the vista, is approached from the lawn by two stairways. Two garage doors are at grade, north of the terrace. Originally, the rear elevation bore a stripped-down resemblance to the front elevation, but was altered, in 1940, by the addition of a second-floor bedroom. The flat-roofed, bedroom structure, which is covered with clapboards, is open at the first floor. It conceals four, two-story, plain pilasters corresponding to their more elaborate front counterparts. The pilasters support the entablature which has continued around the cross-gable roof from the front. There is a radially glazed window in the recessed tympanum of the pediment. Fenestration of the rear elevation is similar to that of the front, but not as rigorously symmetrical. Several of the double windows become French doors, providing access from the interior of the house to the terrace. An exterior chimney rises south of the bedroom structure.

INTERIOR

The floor plans of the house, as built, are attached. The front door opens to a central hall with a half-round rear wall. A stair winds up along the rounded wall to the second floor, under a low dome. The stairwell is a 2½-story open space. In the sinuous wrought-iron stair railing, slender paired picket balusters support a handrail capped with brass.

An intermediate area to the south, known as the music room, extends the full depth of the house from front window to rear window, as do most rooms. It contains six, 18th-century Venetian silk panels, painted in Chinoiserie designs, which are mounted on the walls and ceiling. This space connects with the area behind the hall, which formerly had a stairway to a basement bar and now is the location of an elevator installed in 1974. The marbled woodwork in the hall and music room dates from about 1950.

The sunken living room is two steps down from the music room through a French Rococo arch and double paneled door. The living room has two windows in the front wall and two corresponding French doors in the rear wall, but no window in the south end wall. Between the French doors, there is a fireplace with a French 18th-century mantel and a black stone hearth. Most of the surfaces of the living room walls are covered with eight tempera-on-canvas panels painted by an unknown artist in Turin about 1730. They depict classical landscapes and sea voyages in the style of Claude Lorraine.

The dining room to the north of the central hall is the full depth of the house like the living room, but not as long, and with a single window in the front wall and a single French door in the rear wall, rather than two. The chief architectural and decorative feature of the room is the Rococo bed niche with its flanking angled doors in the north wall, which comes from a 1730 house in Munich. The west door in this composition is to a china closet; the east door leads to the pantry and kitchen.

The furniture, furnishings, and decorative arts objects on the first floor are principally examples of 17th-century to 20th-century Italian and German work.

On the second floor, the central hall is a complete circle, as is the stair well, leaving only 33 inches of space between the railing and the tall front window. Doors in the round wall, near the front of the house, lead south and north. The south door now gives access to a lateral hall toward the rear, which replaces two original closets, and to the original master bedroom to the south. (Figure 3) Detailing in this part of the house is plain, using flush doors, clamshell moldings for door and window surrounds if any at all, and no cornice moldings. Ceiling height is eight feet.

Beyond the master bedroom is Mrs. Austin's dressing room designed in the Bauhaus manner. It was modeled on one in the house of Walter Gropius at Dessau, Germany. The windows in its south wall are a bank of four single-pane apertures, noted in describing the exterior above as being different from others in the house. The floor was black linoleum, and the walls were painted in blue, cocoa, and cream. Paint analysis indicates that the colors are still in place; they are scheduled to be restored. The original chrome lighting fixtures were made in Germany. The furniture consisted of a chair, a stool, and a table designed in tubular chrome by Bauhaus artist Marcel Breuer.

Austin's dressing room and bath are off the central hall on the second floor and are in the International style with a free-standing, stainless-steel washstand and a black tub with a stainless-steel side. The bathroom floor was originally black, and the walls were painted in pink, blue, and beige. Later, the predominant color of three walls became "shocking pink," a color made fashionable in the 1930s by Paris couturier Elsa Schiaparelli, with the fourth wall black. As in Helen Austin's dressing room, the original chrome lighting fixtures were imported from Germany.

A guest bedroom north of the stair hall on the second floor originally was furnished in the Art Deco style with green, silver, and yellow the predominant colors. The furniture, by Bruno Paul, and the wallpaper were imported from Germany. The room was redecorated and put to another use after the birth of the Austin children.

The second floor north of the central hall is now occupied by two bathrooms, a sitting room, a study, a small bedroom, and a service stair to the kitchen.

The added bedroom at the rear is lighted by double casement windows, similar to original windows in the house, three in the east wall and one in the south wall. Like all spaces on the second floor, this room is plain without decorative moldings and with chrome levers for door handles.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: ___ Locally: ___

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A X B X C X D ___

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A ___ B ___ C ___ D ___ E ___ F ___ G ___

NHL Criteria:

2

NHL Theme(s):

- XXVII Education
 - G. Adjunct Educational Institutions
 - 1. Museums, Archives, and Botanical Gardens
- XXIV Painting and Sculpture
 - K. Supporting Institutions

Areas of Significance:

Social History; Architecture

Period(s) of Significance:

1930-1944

Significant Dates:

1930, 1940

Significant Person(s):

A. Everett Austin, Jr.

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder:

Leigh H. French, Jr.
H. Sage Goodwin

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Austin House is an architectural embodiment of A. Everett Austin, Jr.'s, achievements as an impresario of the arts in America. The drama and avant-garde thrust that Austin brought to his work as an innovative museum director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, from 1927 to 1944, are fully expressed in his house. Behind a facade that revives Scamozzi, the house combines the disparate Baroque and International styles, both of which he championed at the museum. The social activities in this house brought together an international group of pioneering figures in the arts, attracted to Hartford by Austin's revolutionary exhibitions and programs at the Atheneum.

A. Everett Austin, Jr. (1900-1957), known almost universally as "Chick," was born on December 18, 1900, in Brookline, Massachusetts, the son of Laura Etnier Austin and Arthur Everett Austin, a prominent Boston physician. An only child, he traveled extensively in Europe beginning at the age of three. He attended Noble and Greenough School in Boston and Phillips Academy, Andover, before entering Harvard in the Class of 1922.

Austin interrupted his undergraduate career to work in Egypt and the Sudan (1922-1923) with the Harvard University/Boston Museum of Fine Arts archaeological expedition under George A. Reisner, then the leading American Egyptologist. After taking his degree in 1924, he became a graduate student in Harvard's fine arts department, where he served for three years as the chief graduate assistant to Edward W. Forbes, Director of the Fogg Art Museum. He was appointed director of the Wadsworth Atheneum at the age of 26. Simultaneously, he joined the staff of Trinity College, Hartford, where he founded the fine arts department and taught throughout his tenure as director of the Atheneum.

In 1929, Austin married Helen Goodwin in Paris. The Goodwins were among the founders of Hartford and the Connecticut Colony in the early 17th century. Civic leaders and philanthropists for generations, they controlled the Atheneum's board of trustees. (Helen Austin's uncle, Charles A. Goodwin, was president of the board from 1926 to 1954.) A quintessential New England dynasty, the Goodwins were closely allied, by marriage and association, with the family of Hartford-born J. Pierpont Morgan, one of the Atheneum's greatest benefactors.

The Austins planned this house during their European wedding trip. As the model for the exterior, they chose the facade of the Villa Ferretti on the Brenta Canal between Venice and Padua, designed in 1596 by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1552-1616). They acquired 18th-century painted panels, sculpture, fabrics, doors, woodwork, and other architectural components in Venice for the interior. Modern furnishings—influenced by both the Art Deco and Bauhaus—were purchased in New York and Germany.

The site of the Austin House was one parcel of several large tracts of Hartford real estate which the Goodwins had been accumulating since the 18th century. The entire block of Scarborough Street was developed by the Goodwin interests in the 1920s and 1930s. Helen Austin's brother and her three uncles also lived on the street. Some sense of the family's

importance in the transaction is suggested by the fact that the deed conveying ownership to Helen Goodwin Austin "of land and new dwelling house" was not entered in the Hartford Land Records until 1932, two years after the house was built.

The architect of record was Leigh H. French, Jr. (1894-1946), of New York City, who had studied architecture at Columbia University. He was well known for his fine suburban homes and his articles on 17th- and 18th-century French country houses in the Palladian style. Among his accomplishments were houses for Mrs. Eleanor Patterson at Dayton, Ohio, and J.O. Lippincott in Bethacres, Pennsylvania. The Goodwins and the Lippincotts were

related by marriage. Helen Austin's cousin, architect Philip Lippincott Goodwin, who also wrote extensively about the provincial houses of France, was well acquainted with French's work. The design of the house, however, was essentially Austin's, and the architect's services were dispensed with during the period of construction. The accompanying plans of the first and second floors were drawn by Henry Sage Goodwin (1904-), another of Helen Austin's cousins, at the time he was asked to design the added bedroom in 1940.

In Austin's work as a museum pioneer, he produced America's first comprehensive exhibitions of Italian baroque painting (1930), surrealism (1931), and the works of Pablo Picasso (1934). The Picasso show formed part of the opening of a new wing, the Avery Memorial, which was largely designed by Austin himself (with Morris & O'Connor of New York City) and boasted the first International style museum interior in the United States. At that time, Austin also inaugurated the Avery Theater, one of the first in an American art museum, with the premiere of the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. With cellophane sets by painter Florine Stettheimer, direction by John Houseman (his first work in the theater), choreography by Frederick Ashton (making his American professional debut), and the first all-black cast in an American opera, this production of *Four Saints* became a landmark in the history of Modernism.

The Atheneum's collections of European paintings and 20th-century masterpieces were single-handedly created by Austin. He assembled one of the country's most distinguished groups of baroque pictures, including the first genuine Caravaggio bought by an American museum. As far as can be determined, he also made the first major museum purchases of works by artists as diverse as William Harnett, Salvador Dali, Joseph Cornell, Joan Miro, and Piet Mondrian. In 1933, he bought the Serge Lifar collection of set and costume designs for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Containing over 180 works by such artists as Bakst, Derain, Modigliani, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Gris, Ernst, and Rouault, the collection was a daring acquisition now recognized as one of the most valuable components of the Atheneum's holdings.

Austin pioneered the presentation of art forms—music, films, photography, dance, theater—then not usually programmed by museums. In 1928, he founded The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music, a society that sponsored premieres or early performances of works by composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives, Erik Satie, and Virgil Thomson—as well as Vivaldi, Scarlatti, and Couperin (played on original instruments). The American premiere of Satie's symphonic drama *Socrate*, for example, with one of Alexander Calder's first mobile sets, was presented in 1936. An innovation begun in 1929 was the showing of motion pictures—foreign, experimental, and classic—seven years before films were shown at the Museum of Modern Art. The most far-reaching of Austin's theatrical ventures was the Atheneum's sponsorship, at Lincoln Kirstein's request, of choreographer George Balanchine's immigration to this country in 1933, originally to found the School of American Ballet in Hartford. Though Balanchine did not remain long in Hartford, his company, which evolved into the New York City Ballet, returned to the Atheneum the following year for its first public performances.

The Atheneum became a lively center for the arts under Austin's direction, prompting the comments by *Variety* in 1936 that Hartford was "America's New Salzburg"¹ and by Le Corbusier in 1937 that Hartford had become "a spiritual center of America."² Russian stage designer Eugene Berman recalled that in the 1930s an immediate visit to Chick Austin in

¹ *Variety*, "America's New Salzburg," January 22, 1936.

² Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathedrales etaient blanches* (Paris: Plon, 1937), p. 194.

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Hartford "was a must with every newcomer to the American shores, with every new artist or leader in the plastic arts or music."³

The social history of Austin's house paralleled his activities at the Atheneum. Visits to the house by a wide range of personalities and social activities related to museum events made Austin's house integral to his professional career. Among the performers, artists, and intellectuals who appeared at the museum during this era were George Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, Martha Graham, Alwin Nikolais, Erick Hawkins, Salvador Dali, Alexander Calder, George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Ernst Krenek, Naum Gabo, Buckminster Fuller, Pavel Tchelitchew, Felia Doubrovska, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Marguerite Yourcenar, May Sarton, Nadia Boulanger, Erwin Panofsky, Richard Neutra, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius. All were entertained at the Austin House.

With the coming of the Second World War, Austin's activities were curtailed. European art markets were closed, annual travel abroad was suspended, and Trinity College art history courses were interrupted. Austin turned increasingly to performing in magic shows and amateur theatricals in the Avery Theater as an outlet for his unquenchable energy. The trustees, who never fully agreed with Austin's commitment to modern art nor understood his consistent refusal to produce conventionally popular exhibitions, regarded his work in the theater as a distraction from his duties. In 1944, after a year's leave of absence spent in Hollywood, Austin made it clear to the board that he would not compromise his standards of acquisitions and exhibitions. He was forced to resign.

In 1946, Austin became the first director of the John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, where he restored and expanded its magnificent baroque painting collection. He also imported the jewel-like, 18th-century theater from Asolo Castle near Venice and installed it on the grounds of the Ringling. He worked in Sarasota in the winter, operated and performed in a highly successful summer theater, the Windham Playhouse, in New Hampshire, and spent the fall in Faience near the French Riviera, where he owned a 17th-century villa. He died of cancer in Hartford on March 29, 1957, at the age of 56.

After Austin's departure from Hartford in 1946, Helen Goodwin Austin remained in residence at 130 Scarborough Street. In 1985, she and her two children, David and Sarah Austin, donated the house to the Wadsworth Atheneum in recognition of its close relationship with the museum. Most of the contents of the house—furnishings, decorative arts, correspondence, books, photographs, and memorabilia—were included in the transfer. Helen Austin died in a nearby retirement home in 1986. The Austin House is now operated as a curatorial department of the museum, serving as a temporary residence for visiting scholars. A restoration is about to begin to make the house available to the public.

Austin's house was a stage set for the theater of his life. In his museum exhibitions and programs, Austin combined the classical with the avant garde, demonstrating his conviction that the art of all periods is compatible. His house reflected that wide vision. Scamozzi's 16th-century facade was transformed into a 20th-century design through application of planar surface and abstracted Ionic capitals. On the interior, the theatrical baroque served as counterpoint to the streamlined utility of the machine age.

Architect Philip Johnson recently described the advanced nature of the Austin House in both its architecture and its social history. "The design of the house," he wrote, "was a daring adaptation of Palladio. It was new to the American scene and is now considered post-modern 'avant la lettre.'" He added that the house "was the gathering [place] for all the

³ Eugene Berman, "Legendary Chick," in *A. Everett Austin, Jr., A Director's Taste and Achievement* (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1958), p. 48.

latest in the field of music, architecture, painting, design, and dance. Chick Austin was a moving spirit in all of these arts and his home made Hartford the center of a worldwide hegira for the arts."⁴

Austin's pioneering role in the arts has been recognized for six decades. In 1935, Paul J. Sachs, Associate Director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, declared, "Chick Austin is the number one museum director of America."⁵ Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote in 1944 that Austin "did things sooner and more brilliantly than any of us."⁶ At Austin's death, Alfred Frankfurter, the longtime editor of *Art News*, then the largest art publication in the world, told the press that Austin "was perhaps the most creative and original of art museum directors in the century since such institutions came into being."⁷ In 1989, John Russell, chief art critic of the *New York Times*, asked his readers "How can anyone, or any set of human beings, compete with the legendary directorate (1927-44) of A. Everett Austin, Jr.? Chick Austin...was the first with everyone and everything.... In everything he did, Austin set an example that others, nation-wide, have tried to follow."⁸ But it was composer Virgil Thomson who definitively summed up Austin's significance in American cultural history: "Chick was a whole cultural movement in one man."⁹

⁴ Philip Johnson, Letter to Eugene R. Gaddis, June 8, 1993, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

⁵ Paul J. Sachs, Letter to A. Everett Austin, Jr., c. May 1935, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

⁶ Alfred Barr, Letter to A. Everett Austin, Jr., c. June 1944, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.

⁷ *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, "Art Museum Director Dies," March 11, 1957.

⁸ John Russell, "From a Glorious Past To a Conspicuously Bright Future," *New York Times*, August 27, 1989.

⁹ Virgil Thomson, "The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music," in *A. Everett Austin, Jr., A Director's Taste and Achievement* (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1958), p. 62.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

____ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

____ Designated a National Historic Landmark.

____ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

____ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office

____ Other State Agency

____ Federal Agency

____ Local Government

____ University

Other (Specify Repository): Archives, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 1.9

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing
A 18 4627780 690380

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property is described at Hartford Land Records, volume 2258, page 114, February 7, 1985.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary is drawn to encompass the land originally deeded to Helen Goodwin Austin before the house was built and also includes an additional 30 feet of frontage she later acquired.

11. FORM PREPARED BYName/Title: David F. Ransom
Architectural Historian
33 Sunrise Hill Drive
West Hartford, CT 06107-3349
Telephone: 203/521-2518

and

Eugene R. Gaddis
Curator of the Austin House
Wadsworth Atheneum
600 Main Street
Hartford, CT 06103-2990
Telephone: 203/278-2690

Date: July 1993

Edited by: Ms. Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian
National Park Service/Washington Office
History Division (418)
P.O. Box 37127, Suite 310
Washington, DC 20013-7127
Telephone: 202/343-8166