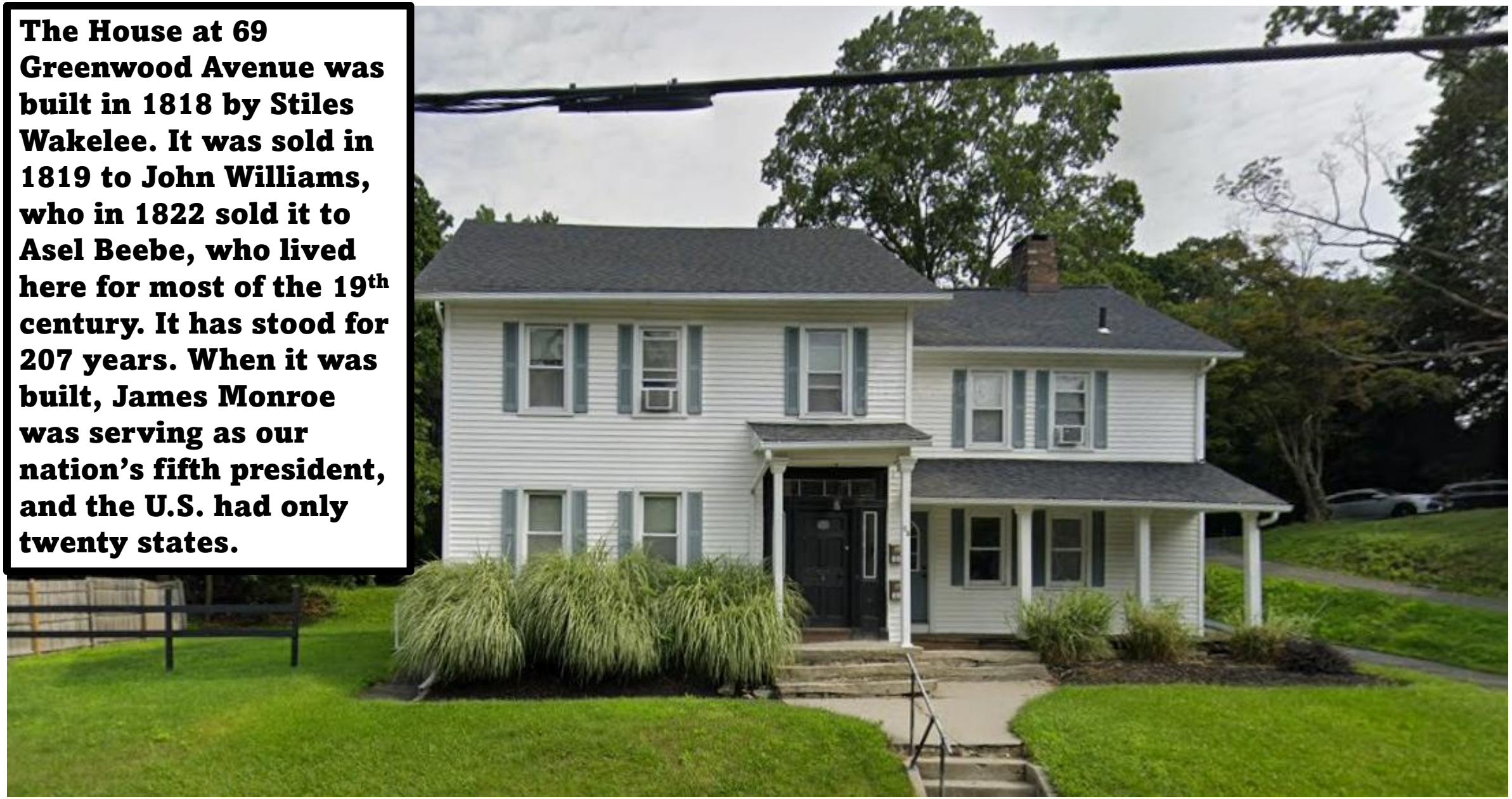
A History of 69 & 67 Greenwood Avenue

The House at 69 Greenwood Avenue was built in 1818 by Stiles Wakelee. It was sold in 1819 to John Williams, who in 1822 sold it to Asel Beebe, who lived here for most of the 19th century. It has stood for 207 years. When it was built, James Monroe was serving as our nation's fifth president, and the U.S. had only twenty states.



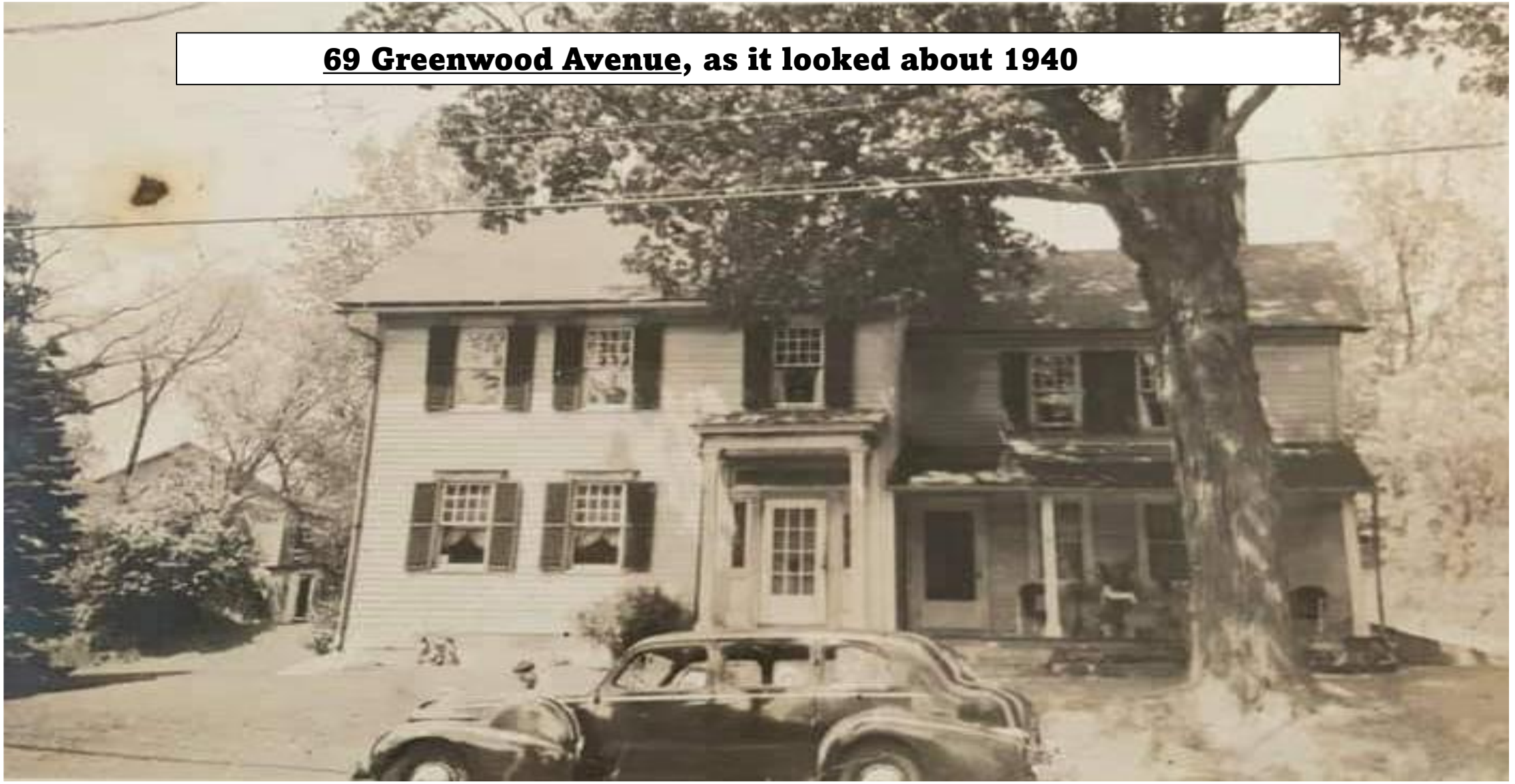
69 Greenwood Avenue retains most of its original 1818 architectural integrity, including its front door, transom light, side lights, and front steps.

Transom Light

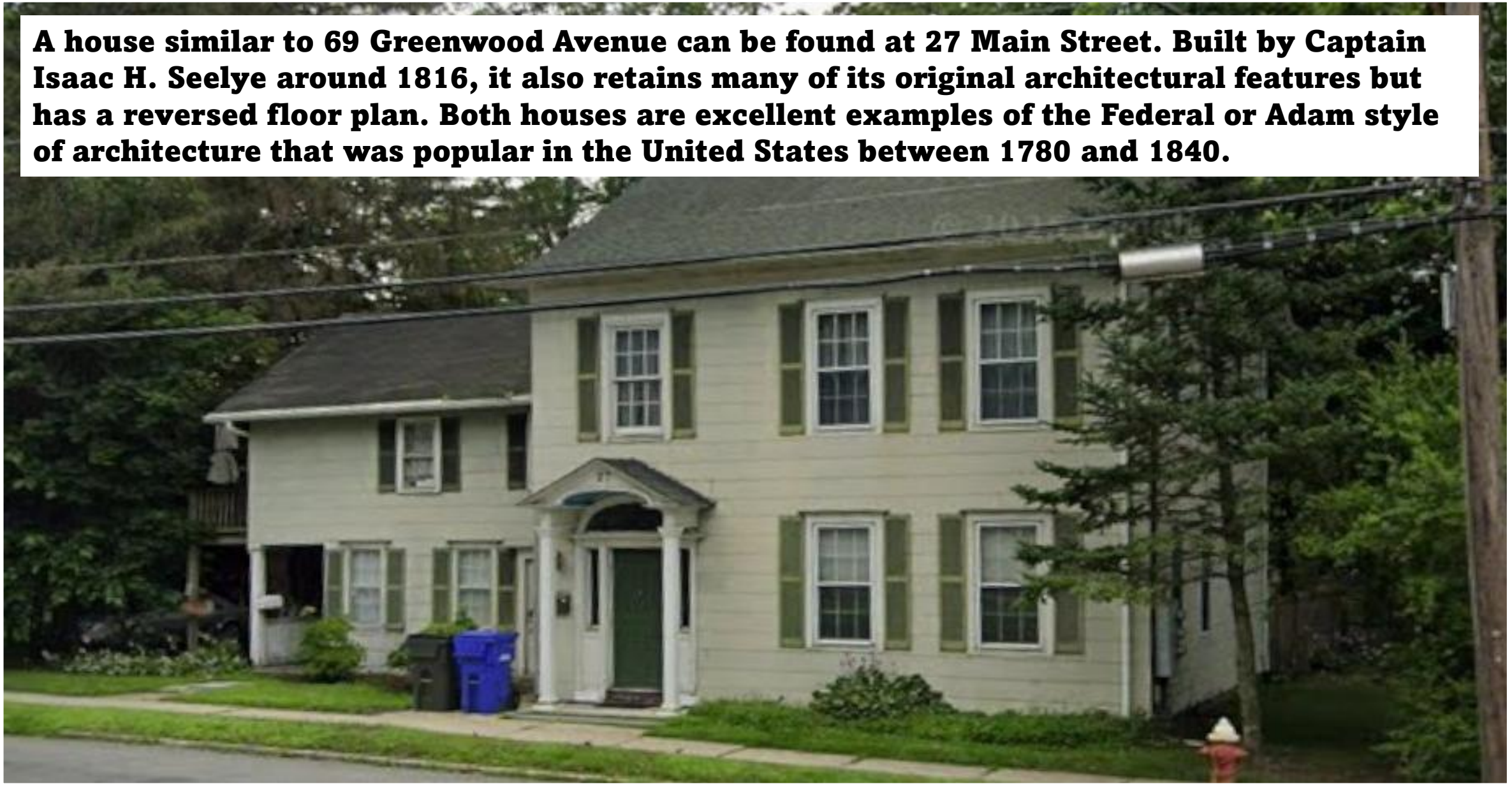
Side Light

Original Granite Steps

<u>69 Greenwood Avenue</u>, as it looked about 1940



A house similar to 69 Greenwood Avenue can be found at 27 Main Street. Built by Captain Isaac H. Seelye around 1816, it also retains many of its original architectural features but has a reversed floor plan. Both houses are excellent examples of the Federal or Adam style of architecture that was popular in the United States between 1780 and 1840.



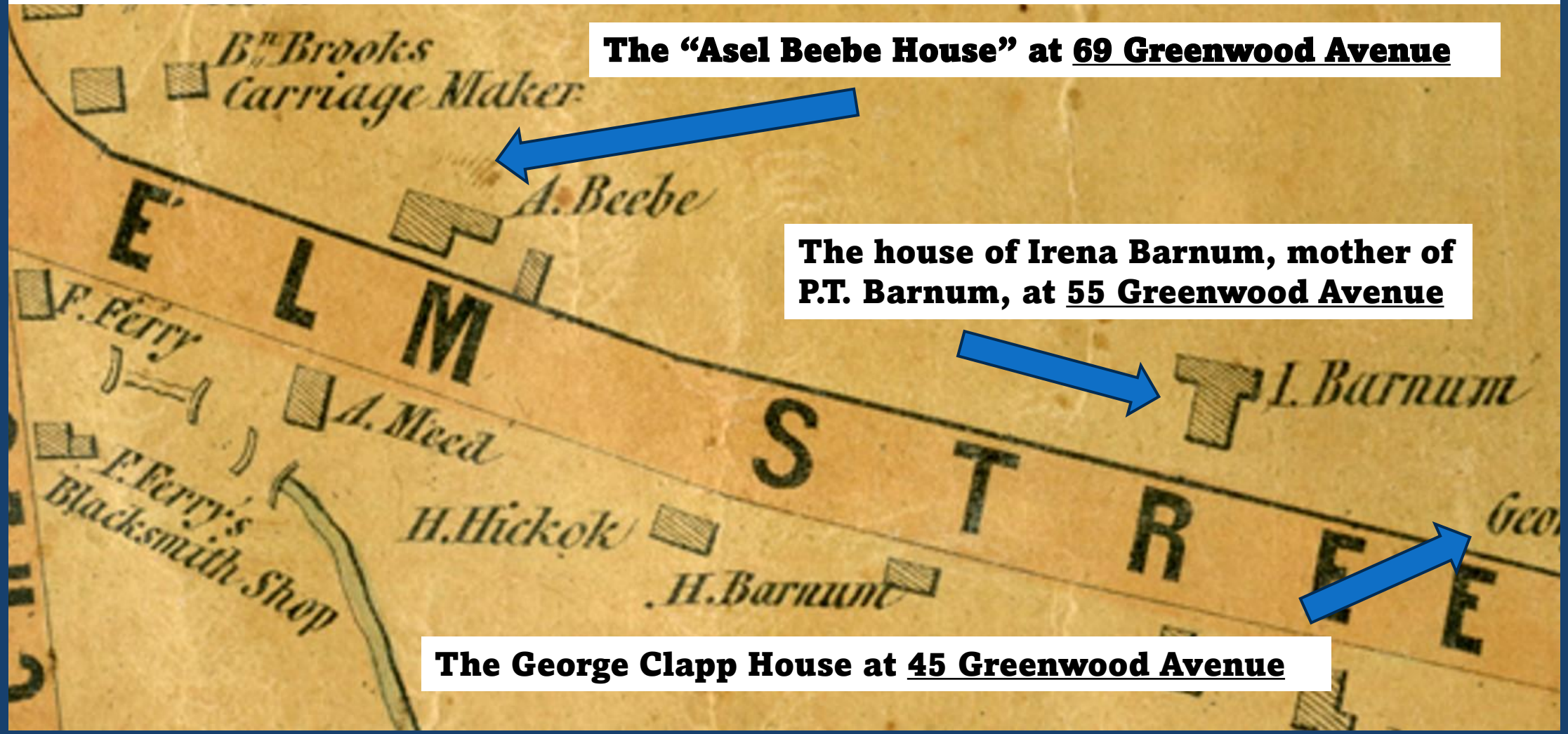
<u>69 Greenwood Avenue</u> and 27 Main Street are shown side by side. The image of 27 Main Street has been flipped for easier comparison.

A Lost Example of Federal Style Architecture – 31 Main Street

Another example of this same style of Federal architecture existed at 31 Main Street until it was destroyed by fire in February 2004. Land records suggest that this house was also built in 1816 by Stiles Wakelee, who was responsible for building 69 Greenwood Avenue.

1851 David McCarthy Map of Danbury & Bethel

The oldest known map of Bethel shows the portion of Greenwood Avenue that was known as Elm Street until 1935.

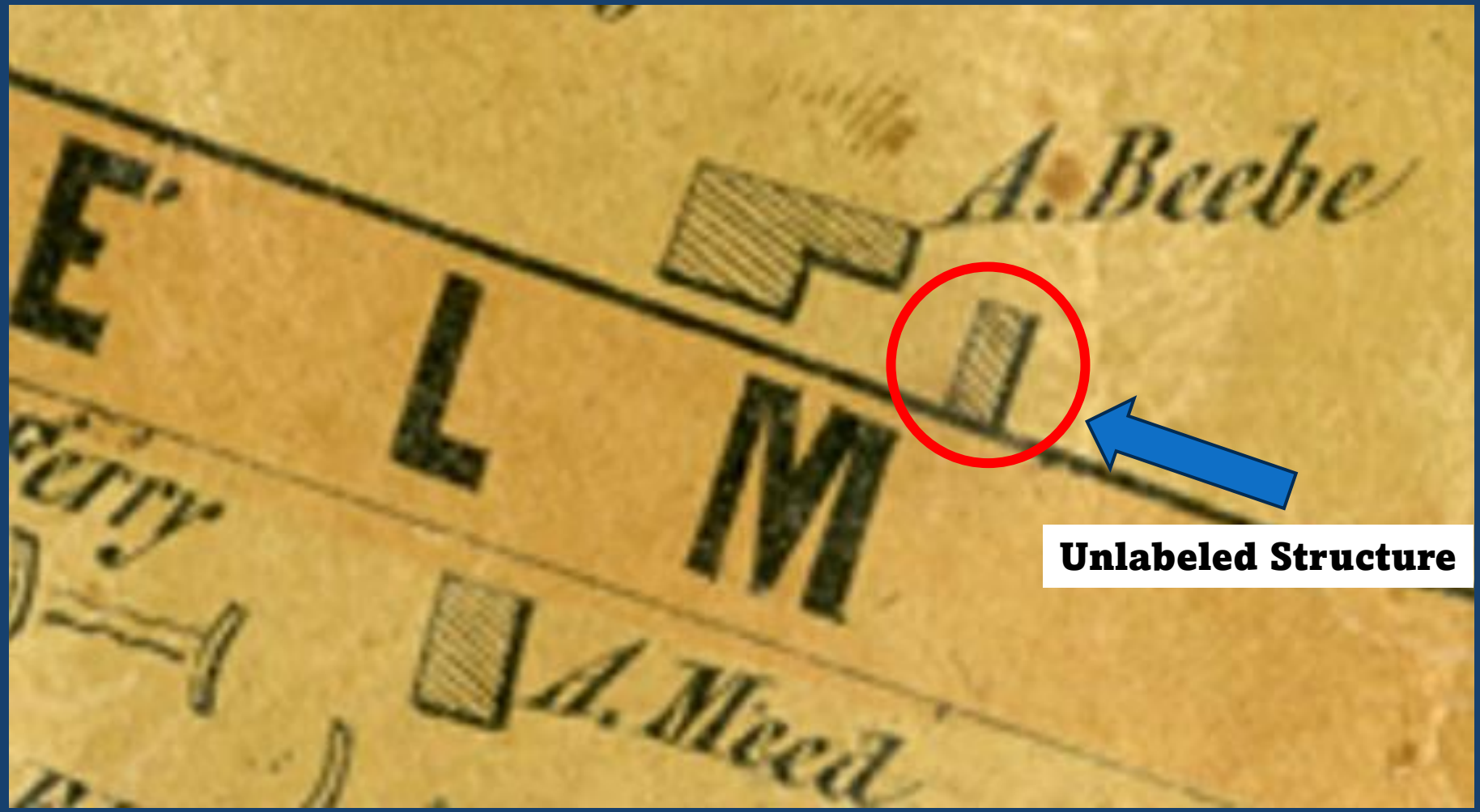


The "Asel Beebe House" at 69 Greenwood Avenue

The house of Irena Barnum, mother of P.T. Barnum, at 55 Greenwood Avenue

The George Clapp House at 45 Greenwood Avenue

<u>69 Greenwood Avenue, the "Asel Beebe House"</u>, and an adjacent structure in 1851.

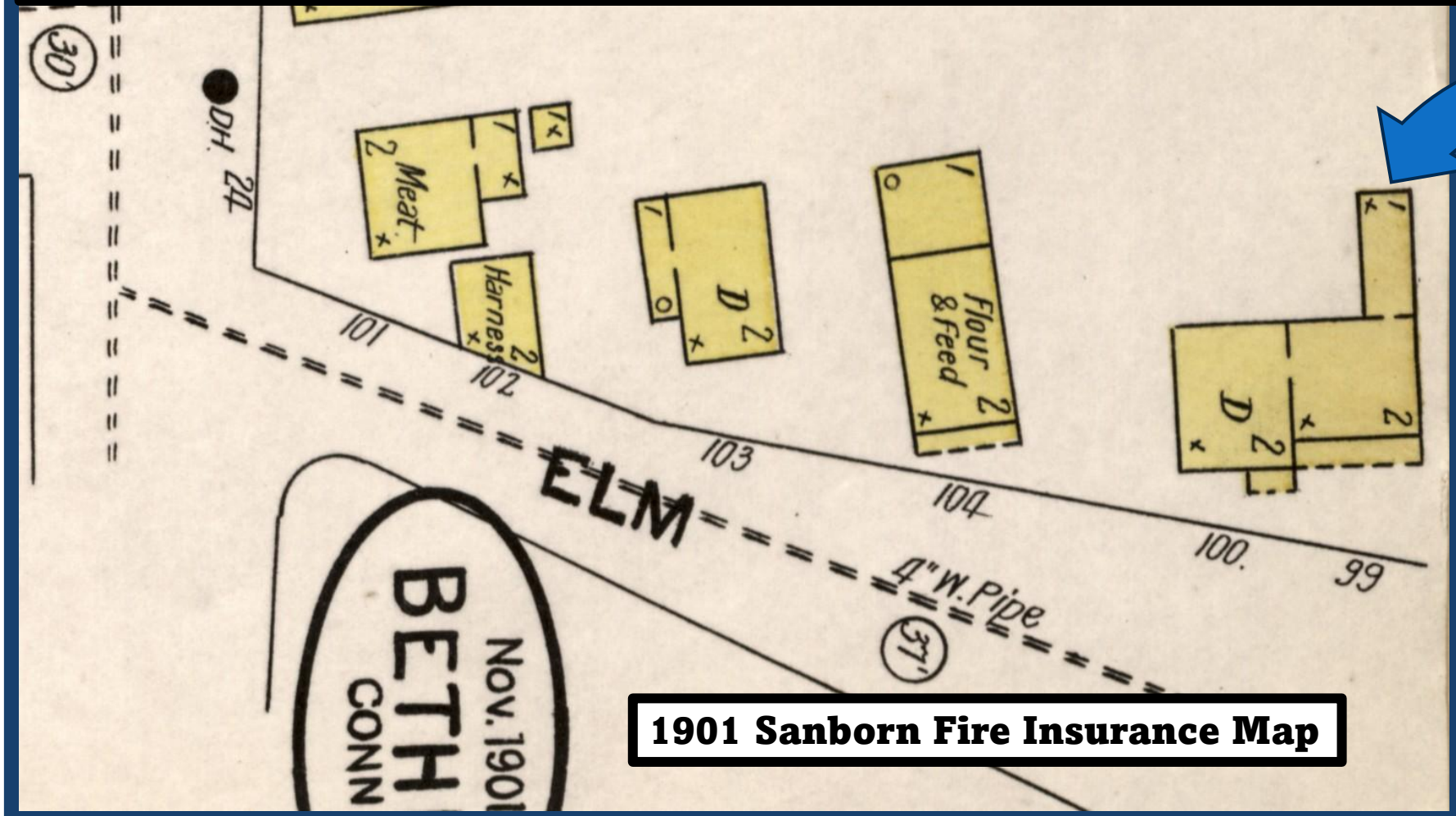


Barnum Recalled His Old School In A Speech He Gave in 1881:

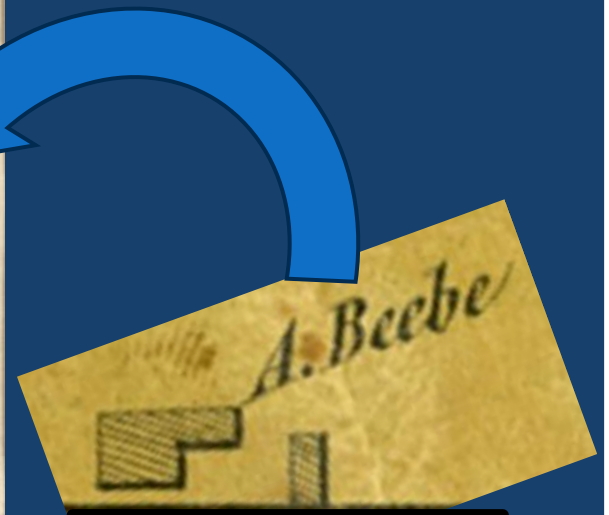
and Rachel, lived on the other side of the street, farther west.

"The old schoolhouse stood near where Asel Beebe's house now stands. Captain Noah Ferry lived where George Clapp afterward resided, and 'Squire Ben Hoyt lived at the foot of Hoyt's Hill. Phineas Judd and his sons, Silliman, Willis, and Almon, with a daughter Sarah and one other daughter, lived on the top of Hoyt's Hill. Beyond him, in Wolfpits, lived Eleazer Taylor, Charles and Ledowick Dart, Uncle Caleb Morgan, the two Samuel Judds—the eldest of whom, on account of his swarthy complexion, was called 'Black Sam'—Abel Hoyt, the father of Starr, Joshua, Warren, Giles, and several daughters.

When Prospect Street was created in the 1850s, the old schoolhouse, which had not been used for school purposes since 1828, was moved and attached to the northeast corner of 69 Greenwood Avenue, traditionally known as the "Asel Beebe House."



1901 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map



Section of 1851 McCarthy Map

P.T. Barnum's School

nies, to buy raisins and candies, which he always instructed me to solicit from the store-keeper at the "lowest cash price"—and proceed to talk of later events.

I commenced going to school at the age of about six years. The first date which I recollect inscribing upon my writing-book, was 1818. A school-house in those days was a thing to be dreaded—a schoolmaster, a kind of being to make the children tremble. My first school-teacher was a Mr. Camp, the second Mr. Zerah Judson, the third a Mr. Curtiss from Newtown, the fourth Dr. Orris T. Taylor, and afterwards my uncle Alanson Taylor, etc. In the summers Miss Hannah Starr, an excellent teacher, of whom I was an especial favorite, and for whom I have ever entertained the highest respect, was our school-mistress. The first three male teachers used the ferule prodigiously, and a dark dungeon which was built in the house, was tenanted nearly all the time during school hours, by some unlucky juvenile frequently under eight years of age, who had incurred the displeasure of the "one-man power."

P.T. Barnum recalled his experiences at the Center School in his autobiography. He would have begun attending the school in 1816 and most likely completed his schooling here by approximately 1822.

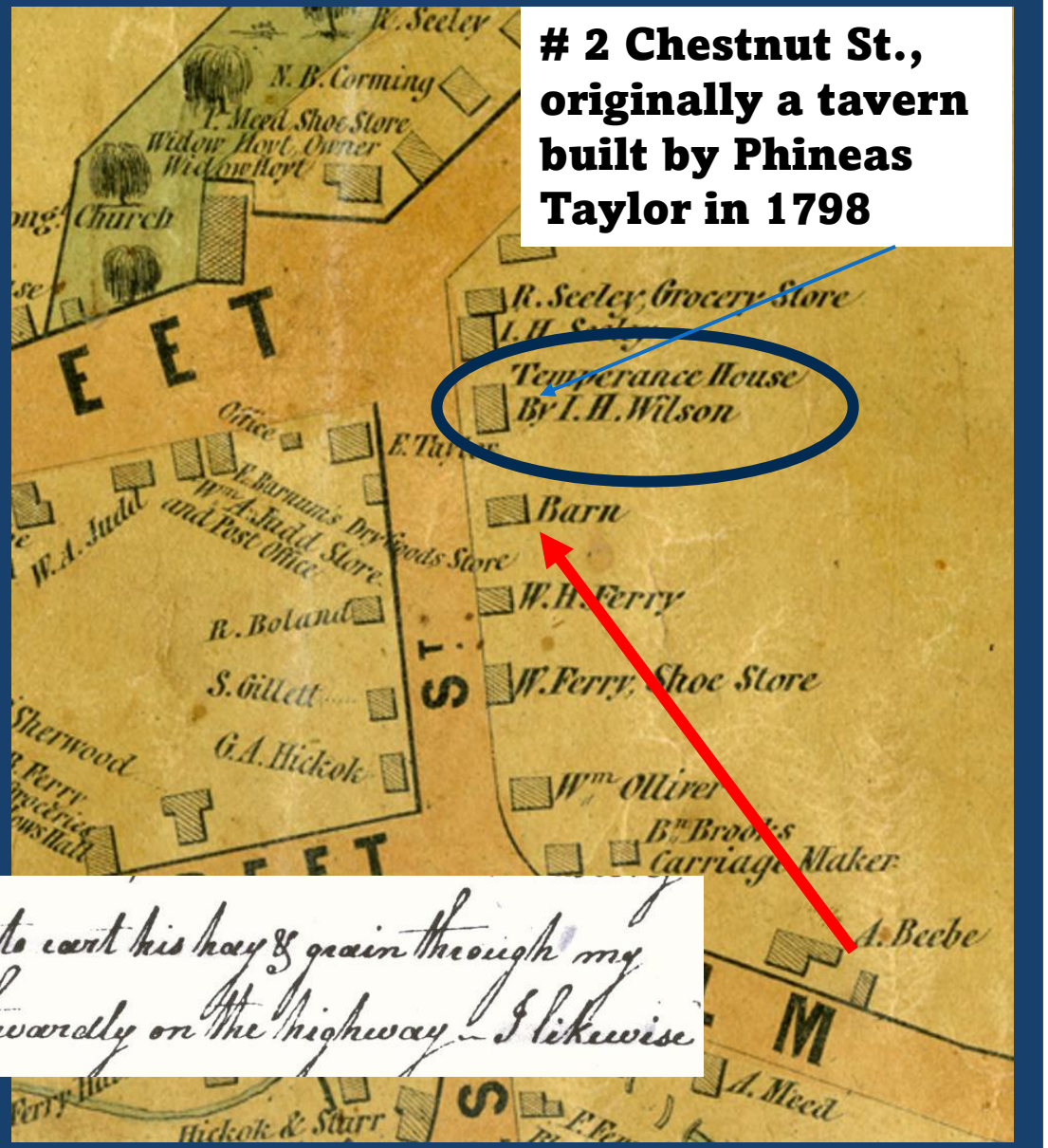
*** ferule – a ruler with a widened end, formerly used for punishing children.**

Another Mention of the Old Schoolhouse:

Barnum's grandfather, Phineas Taylor, sold the tavern he owned at 4 Chestnut Street to Stiles Wakelee in 1816. In the deed of sale, he granted Wakelee the following right:

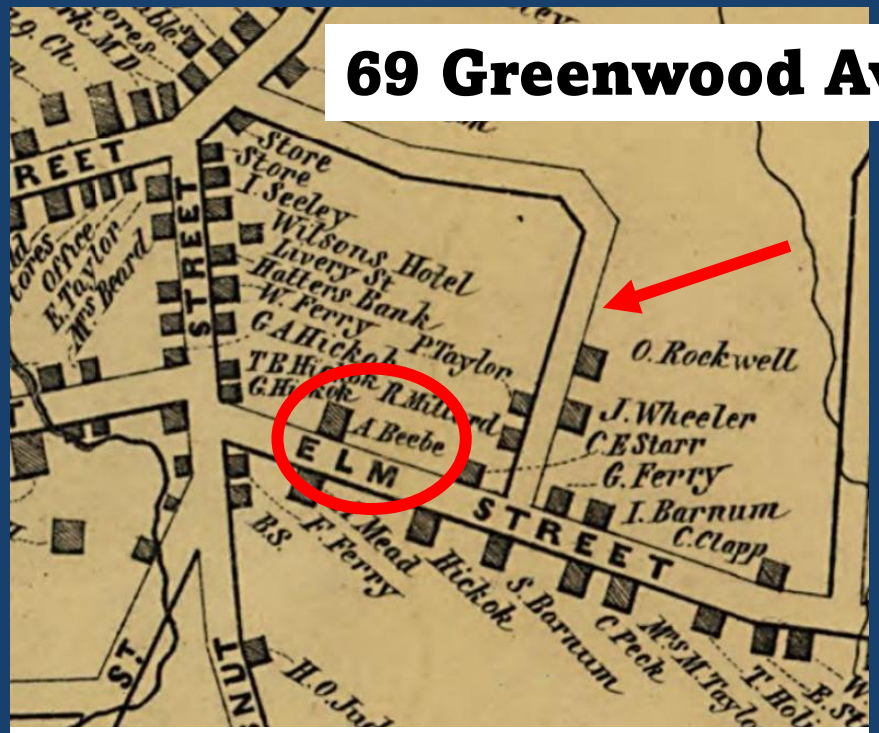
"with liberty to cart his hay and grain through my other land to his barn from a School house standing Southwardly on the highway."

Danbury Land Records, Volume 17, Page 445, May 12, 1816



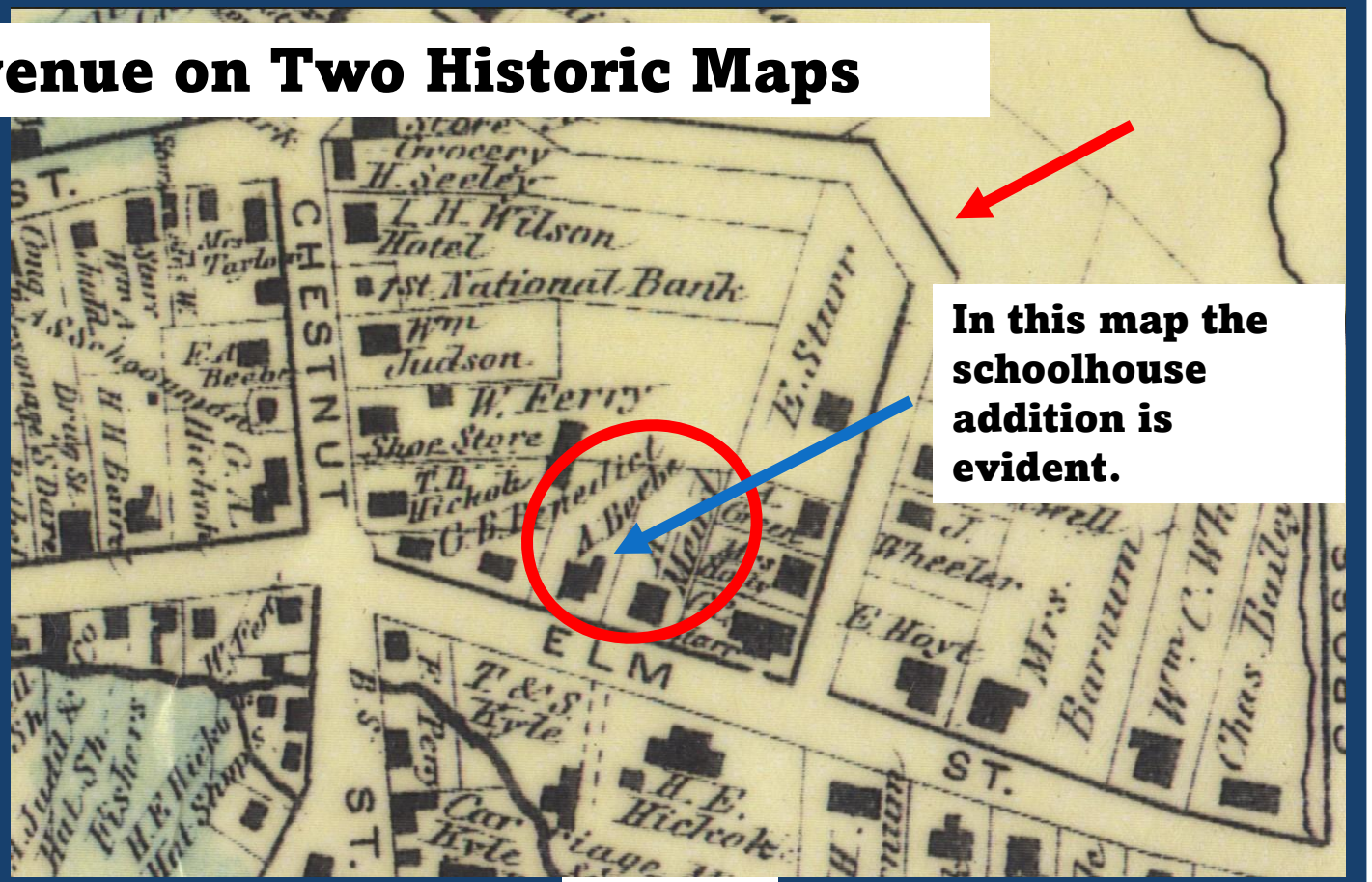
one rod East of the Barn standing on said land, with liberty to cart his hay & grain through my other land to his barn from a School house standing Southwardly on the highway — & likewise

69 Greenwood Avenue on Two Historic Maps



Houses are shown by generic squares, and so the addition is not clearly evident.

1856

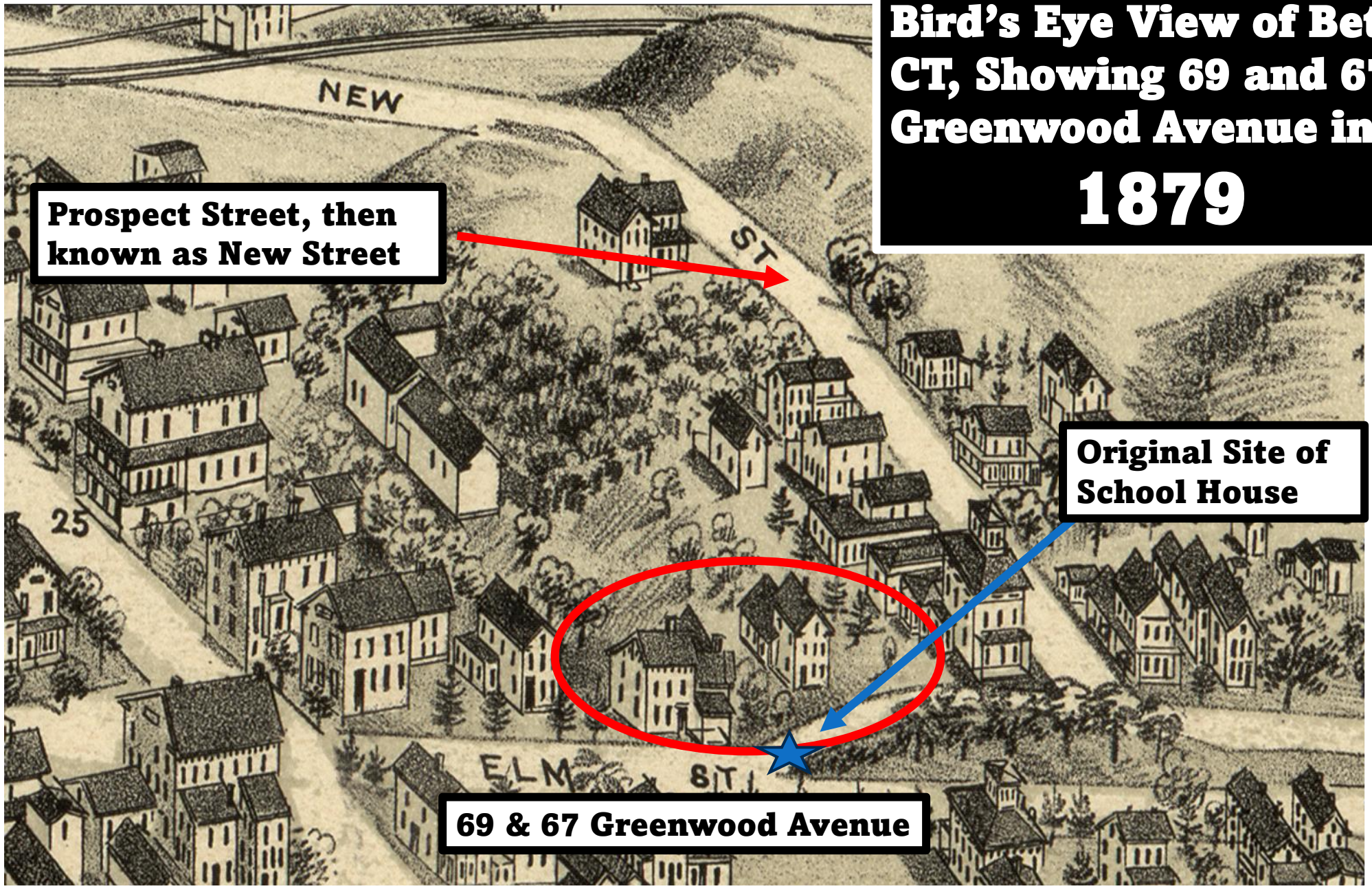


In this map the schoolhouse addition is evident.

1867

Prospect Street (indicated by red arrows), called initially New Street, was created between 1852 and 1856.

Bird's Eye View of Bethel, CT, Showing 69 and 67 Greenwood Avenue in 1879



The Old School House Used as an Addition

The old schoolhouse is shown attached to the northwest corner of 69 Greenwood Avenue, and a similar schoolhouse found in Barkhamsted, CT, is shown for comparison. The former school now sits lower than it originally did. The hillside behind the house was excavated so that the foundations of the existing house and its addition could be placed at the same level.

The Center School, Barkhamsted, Connecticut

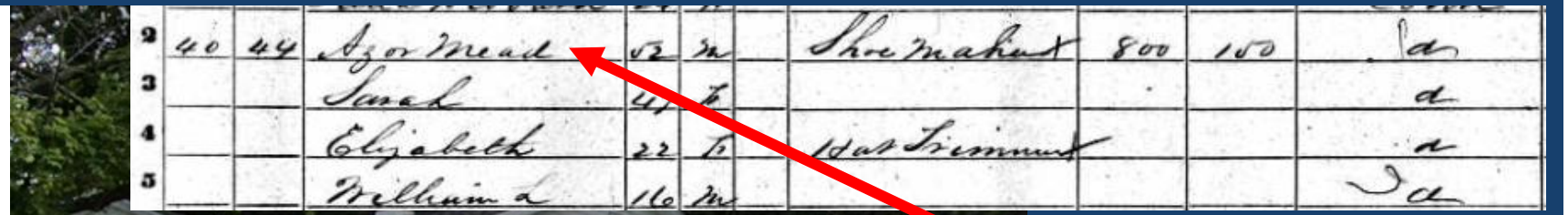
The Bethel Center School had a similar cellar, which Barnum referred to as a "dark dungeon." This end would have originally faced Greenwood Avenue.

P.T. Barnum

The house at 67 Greenwood Avenue is an example of Greek Revival-style architecture and was built about 1860. Its original owner was Azor Mead, a shoemaker who bought the property in 1856. It does not appear on a 1858 map of Bethel, but does appear on one produced in 1867.

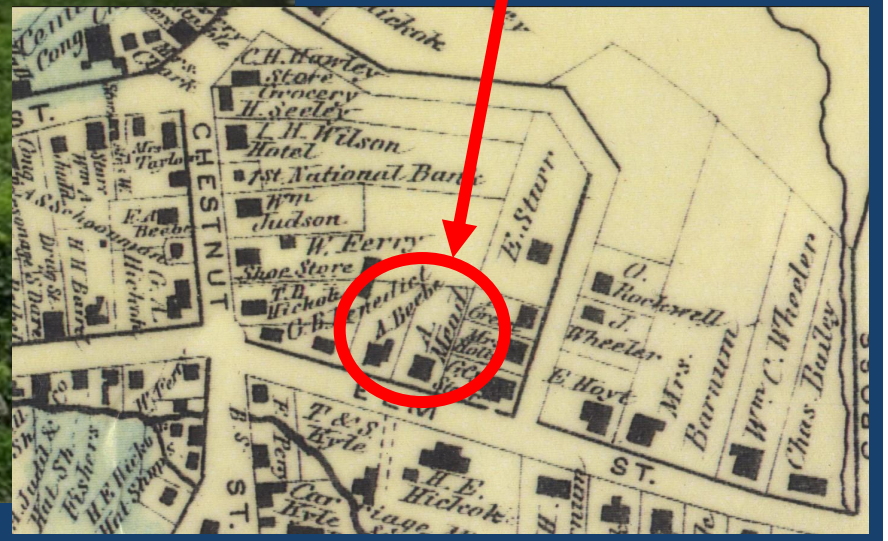
See:
Bethel Land Records, Volume 1, Page 211, August 12, 1856

The grave of Azor Mead (1806-1892) is in the Center Cemetery.



2	40	44	Azor Mead	52	M		Shoemaker	800	150	Ct
3			Sarah	47	F					Ct
4			Elizabeth	22	F		Hat Trimmer			Ct
5			William L	16	M					Ct

Azor Mead is listed in the 1860 Census above and is shown as the owner of 67 Greenwood Avenue in the 1867 Beers Atlas, below.



CONCLUSIONS:

- **Two historic structures would be destroyed if this proposed development were approved, one dating back to 1818, and the other to approximately 1860.**

- **The house at 69 Greenwood Avenue is of historic importance for several distinct reasons, one of which is that it is an excellent example of Federal style architecture and is still very much in its original state.**

- **A portion of this same house is a surviving example of a small one-room schoolhouse dating from the late 18th century or slightly earlier.**

- **This same schoolhouse was once attended by P.T. Barnum, who is unquestionably the most notable figure to ever live in Bethel. In 1990, he was named one of the "100 Most Important People of the Past 1000 Years" by Life magazine.**

- **67 Greenwood Avenue is a Greek Revival-style house dating to approximately 1860 and has been a fixture overlooking Greenwood Avenue for the past 165 years.**

- **The demolition of these two houses would represent a significant historical and architectural loss for Bethel and would greatly diminish the historical character of the downtown district.**