

May 26, 2005

A Sears Roebuck home on tour

This year's Victorian Willimantic Home Tour weekend gets under way June 4 and 5. Today we will explore the two new houses included in this year's tour of 12 homes. They



Tom Beardsley

are at 214 Lewiston Ave. and 97 Mountain St.

Local builder Wesley D. Morse built the house at 214 Lewiston Ave. in 1890. It typifies the northward growth, extent and style of middle-class suburban housing on the Hill during the last 25 years of the 19th century.

Minnie Tiffany bought Morse's house in 1895 and lived there until she left the city in 1916. That year an optician, George C. Moon, and his wife Elizabeth bought the property and it remained in the family until 1954, when purchased by the Erickson family.

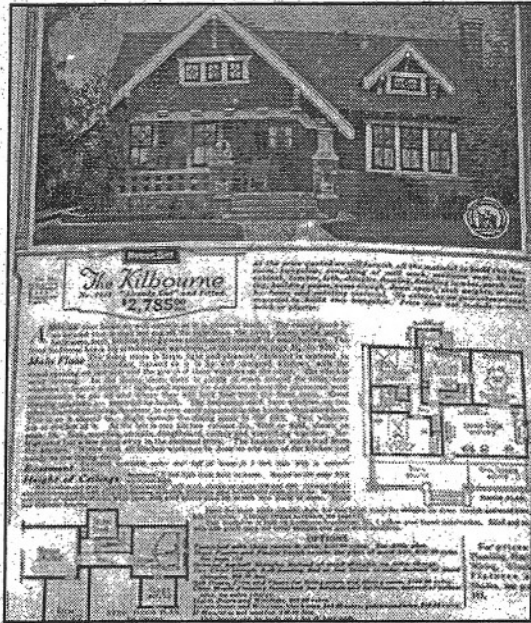
Strictly speaking, the house at 97 Mountain St. should not be included in a Victorian House tour because it was built in 1929. Nevertheless, it not only represents Willimantic's 20th century growth, but also a new style and type of house construction ideally fitted to rapid suburban growth. The Mountain Street structure is a Sears Roebuck Co. catalogue house.

Between 1908 to 1940, approximately 100,000 people across the nation purchased their ready-to-assemble homes through mail order from Sears. They could choose from 450 models with a description, a picture, floor plans, prices, and locations.

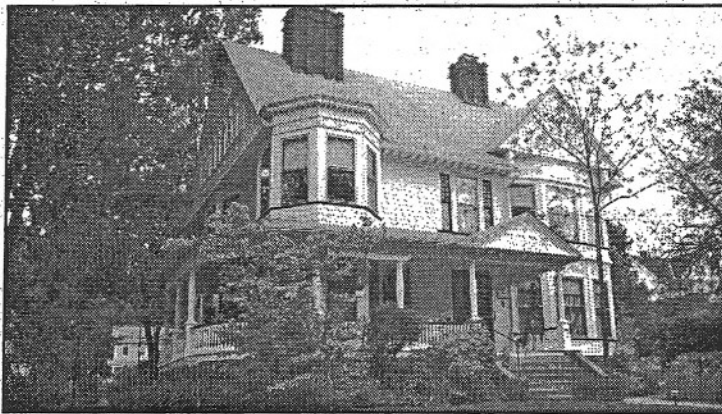
Sears sought to make ordering them "as easy as ordering an automobile, radio or piece of furniture." The houses, which had on

Two homes that will be on the June 4 and 5 Victorian Willimantic Home Tour. RIGHT: The advertisement and plans for a Sears Roebuck catalogue house on Mountain Street.

BELOW: The Victorian house at 214 Lewiston Ave.



Fran Funk



average 30,000 separate pieces, and cost between \$650 and \$2500, were usually shipped by rail and often were assembled by Sears employees. Each kit included 750 pounds of nails and 27 gallons of paint and varnish. A 75-page instruction book showed homebuyers, systematically, how to assemble all those individual pieces of house.

The overall architectural style of 97 Mountain St. is Craftsman, a building style originating around 1903 in California. It was inspired by two brothers, Charles and Henry Greene, who practiced

in Pasadena. These "bungalows" were influenced by the English arts and crafts movement and were popularized in mass circulation magazines, such Good Housekeeping, and Ladies Home Journal. As a result, a flood of pattern books appeared and Sears took advantage of the trend and supplied pre-cut packages of lumber with plans enabling either Sears teams or local labor to build the houses. The most distinctive features of a Sears catalogue house are its stone chimneys, porch columns, dormer windows and small multi-paned windows.

Throughout its life, 97 Mountain St. was both a rental and private house. Vanderman Manufacturing Co. machinist and salesman Theodore Rivard was the house's first occupant. He moved into the newly assembled house in 1930 and Connecticut Agricultural College professor Pennoyer F. English and his family took it over in 1936.

English was a wildlife researcher who came to Storrs from the University of Michigan to work on a federally financed ecosystem study that took place during the New Deal years in nine states. English moved out to Windham Center two years later and Thomas Minor, a salesman based in Waterbury, lived in the house until the outbreak of World War II. In 1944, an osteopath, Dr. Harley H. Shafer, moved to Mountain Street. He conducted his practice at 29 North St. in a small hospital demolished in 1974 during redevelopment.

Shafer went to live in the Hill District in 1948, at 246 North St., and Sophia Andrychowski, a saleswoman, took over the Sears House that year. In 1950 Stanley Andrychowski, the proprietor of Andrychowski's Market at 2 Bricktop Road, joined her. He retired and the Andrychowskis remained in this fine house for the rest of their lives. Its appearance is a look at an interior suburban design dominated by art deco and art modern styling.

Also as part of the weekend, I will be leading tours of the American Thread complex at 10 a.m. both days. On June 4, at 1 p.m., I will conduct a tour of the old Willimantic Cemetery.