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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL MONUMENTS SERVICE

PETERSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

CENTER HILL

CENTER HILL MANSION

J. WALTER COLEMAN

December 17, 1936

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
PETERSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK
PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

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The Director,
National Park Service,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Director:

Enclosed are historical and architectural reports on the "Center Hill" mansion in Petersburg. The architectural features are described technically by Walter G. Peter, Jr., Assistant Architect, and the historical facts are presented by Manning C. Voorhis, Junior Historian. In a memorandum for the Director on the subject of "Center Hill" dated August 13, Mr. Peter's description was enclosed with photographs and a plan. Since no one here is available to reproduce this plan, it is suggested that the sketch accompanying the previous memorandum be noted at this time. A discrepancy in the estimated date of the building must be explained. Mr. Peter who places the date as 1838 bases his opinion on the architectural details. Mr. Voorhis later discovered, through examining the tax lists, that definite reference is made to the "Center Hill" mansion in 1824. In 1820 reference is made to "Center Hill" as "improving and not fit for use." This, we believe, clearly establishes the date of construction as in the early twenties.

The accompanying map shows the location of the mansion as being near the main throughfares, but it should be noted that the building is accessible from Henry Street only by a very steep hill, making it virtually accessible only from Franklin Street. Parking facilities while not ideal, could be made adequate without great difficulty.

The building could be used as a combined headquarters and museum, for which ample room would be available. "Center Hill" is not ideal for these purposes but it would be fairly satisfactory. It is thought that a sum ranging from \$2000. to \$3000. would provide heat, light, janitor service, and maintenance. It is very difficult to estimate the cost of repairing, but the building is apparently in fairly good condition. It has been suggested that \$5000. would be sufficient for repairs and alterations.

Sincerely yours,
J. Walter Coleman
J. Walter Coleman
Superintendent

CENTER HILL

HISTORICAL REPORT

The Bolling family of "Bollingbrook" and "Center Hill" has been outstanding in Petersburg's history from the early 18th century. Scarcely any public enterprise lacked their leadership or assistance, and indeed the family once owned a considerable portion of the town and its early commercial and industrial undertakings. The fact that Petersburg was generally called "Bolling's Point" even long after the official name had been bestowed, indicates the unique prominence of the family. A full account of the early history of the Bollings of "Bollingbrook" has been presented previously,¹ therefore, this report will be concerned with the later structure "Center Hill" and its occupants.

It was customary in the Petersburg line of the Bolling family to name the eldest son Robert. The particular Robert Bolling for whom "Center Hill" was built was born in 1759 at "Bollingbrook,"² and served as a Captain of the militia cavalry in the Revolutionary War battle that took place at the very gates of that old mansion.³ In the same year, 1781, the

young man was elected to The Virginia House of Delegates, representing the region just as his father had served in The House of Burgesses.⁴

After the Revolution Captain Bolling devoted himself to the management of the considerable estate which his father had left him. In colonial times Petersburg and Blandford had been separated by the lands attached to "Bollingbrook" - that is to say, the tract between modern Sycamore Street and Lieutenant Run. Except for "Bollingbrook" and the Bolling tobacco warehouses and shipping wharves, there were few other buildings on this tract, it being partly used as a pasture for the fine horses belonging to Mr. Bolling's mother.⁵ In 1783, Robert Bolling began to lay out this land into lots, selling some of them outright and leasing others on ninety-nine year terms.⁶ Within this area he donated lands for a market place and a site for the court house, where he served as Alderman, Recorder, and finally Mayor of the town, which expanded to a great extent on his lands and according to his planning.⁷

Captain Bolling was a leader in the commercial and industrial development of the community, holding

considerable interests in local steamship lines, railroads, cotton and flour mills. In the early years of the republic Petersburg was an outstanding industrial center, due, in great measure, to the enterprise of Mr. Bolling.⁸

In 1785 or thereabouts Captain Bolling and his first wife, Mary, moved from "Bollingbrook" to nearby "West Hill," a house which is still standing and which was originally used by the stewards of the Bolling estate.⁹ Finally Mr. Bolling determined to build a home more in keeping with his station as the town's leading citizen. Although we now regard "West Hill" as a good example of colonial architecture, Captain Bolling probably thought it out of style, and in any case too small for his purpose. Accordingly in 1820¹⁰ he began building on "Center Hill" planned as a spacious mansion in the then fashionable Greek revival manner. The site chosen was a commanding hill between "Bollingbrook" (or "East Hill") and "West Hill" mansions. The grounds, consisting of six acres, were laid out in formal plan with stables and service buildings in keeping with the dignity of the house.¹¹ Altogether the place was the finest in Petersburg, dominating the city and the many properties leased by the Bollings on terms suggesting feudal tenure.¹²

When Captain Bolling died in 1839, he left the property for the use of his wife during her lifetime and the possession of his oldest son Robert Buckner Bolling¹³ who enjoyed, except for an interruption hereafter mentioned, the luxury and responsibilities of the estate until his death in 1881.¹⁴

After the Confederate evacuation of Petersburg, "Center Hill"^{was} occupied by Major General George Hartsuff as headquarters of the division acting as military garrison of Petersburg.¹⁵ This, of course, made the mansion house even more prominent being the center of authority for the control of all aspects of the civic life during the unsettled period. It is said that President Lincoln examined "Center Hill" during his brief stop in Petersburg on the occasion of its capture.¹⁶ This, however, scarcely seems possible, since the President entered the city, April 3, 1865, at about 9:30 A.M. and, after spending an hour and a half with General Grant at the Wallace house, returned to City Point.¹⁷ General Warren, in command of Petersburg and City Point until General Hartsuff's arrival, made his headquarters at a house on the corner of Washington and Sycamore Streets.¹⁸ General Hartsuff did not arrive in Petersburg

until April 5, 1865.¹⁹ It is also reported that the house shows marks of the Federal shelling.²⁰ These scars have not as yet been discovered.

"Center Hill" again came into special prominence when, in 1909, President Taft was entertained at the mansion at a public banquet, at the time of the President's dedication of the Pennsylvania Civil War Monument. The President made a speech from the lawn of the house, where long tables were set up to accommodate the diners.²¹

FOOTNOTES

1. Voorhis, M.C., "Bollingbrook" William and Mary College Quarterly, October, 1936.
2. Bolling Papers, MSS, Petersburg, Virginia, Public Library, p. 133.
3. Bland Papers, Charles Campbell, Editor, (Petersburg, 1840) Vol. 2, p. 68.
4. Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. 5, p. 217.
5. Marquis de Chastellux, Travels in North America, (1828 edition) pp. 267-268.
Plat Book, Petersburg, Virginia, Clerk's Office, Vol. 1, Plat No. 21.
6. Bolling Papers, loc. cit. pp. 133-142, p. 238.
7. Minutes of the Hustings Court, Petersburg, Virginia, Vol. 2, p. 195.
8. Bolling Rent Rolls, MSS, Petersburg, Virginia, Public Library, November, 1839.
9. Minutes of the Hustings Court, loc. cit., pp. 337-340.
Statutes at Large: A Collection of the Laws of Virginia, W.W. Hening, Editor, Vol. 12, p. 42.
10. Land Book, Petersburg, Virginia, Clerk's Office, Vol. 1820-1823, p. 3 Vol. 1824-1829, p. 3.
11. Will Book, Petersburg, Virginia, Clerk's Office, Vol. 3, p. 170.
12. Bolling Papers, MSS, loc. cit.
13. Will Book, loc. cit., Vol. 3, p. 170.
14. Will Book, loc. cit., entries of July 1881.
15. Pryor, Mrs. Roger A., Reminiscences of Peace and War, (N.Y., 1924) p. 362.
16. Davis, A.K., Three Centuries in an Old Virginia Town, pp. 9-10.

17. War of the Rebellion Official Records, Series I, Vol. 46, Part 3, pp. 508-509.
18. Ibid, Part 3, p. 562.
19. Ibid, Part 3, p. 568.
20. Davis, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
21. A number of unpublished photographs taken on this occasion are in the Petersburg, Virginia, Public Library.

DESCRIPTION OF

CENTER HILL

PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

The accompanying plans of the first and second floors of "Center Hill" are intended as sketches only, and all dimensions, locations of doors, windows, etc., are approximate.

The house, built in 1838, is a very good example of the architecture of that period, being rich in decadent classical forms and detail. It is a two-story brick building, laid in Flemish bond, with high basement, heavy wood denticulated cornice, tin roof and low cupola. The base of the porches are of rusticated brick work, while the floors are of marble blocks boarded by granite which supports the Ionic columns. The wing on the East has brick pilasters two stories in height with their base at the first floor line. There are no shutters on the windows in the wing, while the windows in the house proper have louvered shutters.

The basement extends under the entire structure and porches, and gives access to a vault under the rear steps as well. The floors are of wood, except in the boiler room and under the porches where they are of concrete.

The first story, approximately 14 feet in height, has heavily enriched plaster cornices and ceilings as well as ornamented trim and panelled dados and marble mantels.

The second story, approximately 12 feet in height, is not as ornate but has rather elaborate trim, ornamented wood mantels, wood dados, and panelled window jambs.

The attic is of no particular consequence, having a low ceiling and being lighted by the cupola only.

The house is equipped with steam heat, electricity and gas. It is not known whether or not the heating is satisfactory. The radiators on the first floor are round, of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ foot diameter, and give a very poor appearance. The lighting is wholly inadequate, there being very few base plugs and wall outlets. The chandeliers in the center of the rooms originally intended for gas have been wired for electricity.

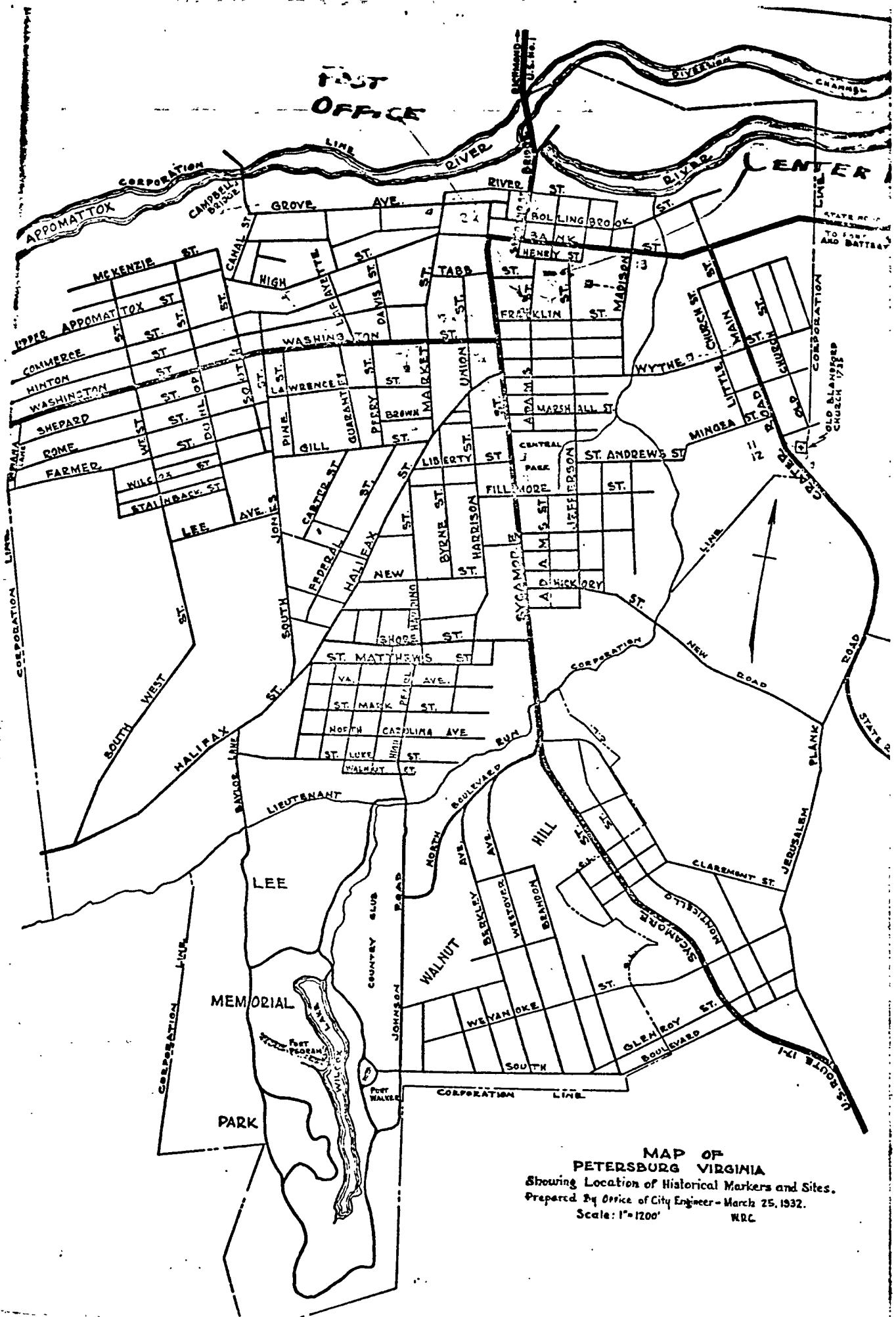
The floors, doors, windows, stairs, plaster, porch columns, etc., are in good condition.

The only apparent repair work necessary to the exterior is painting and on the interior papering and painting.

August 13, 1936.

Submitted by

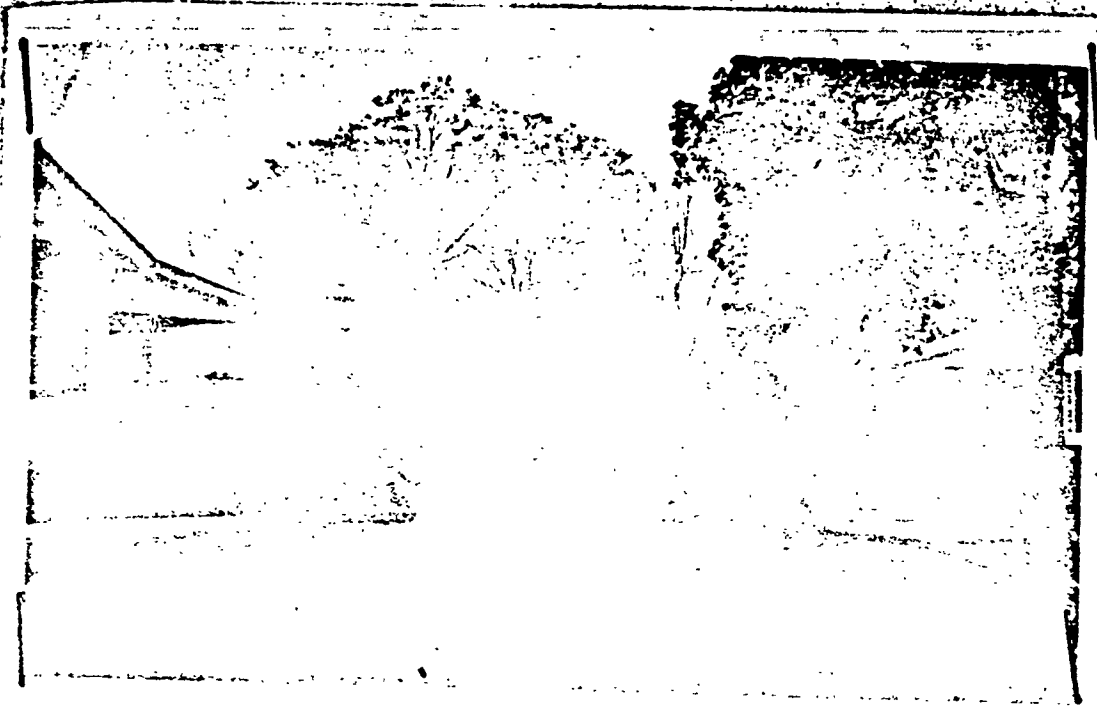
Walter G. Peter, Jr.
Assistant Architect



FORT OFFICE

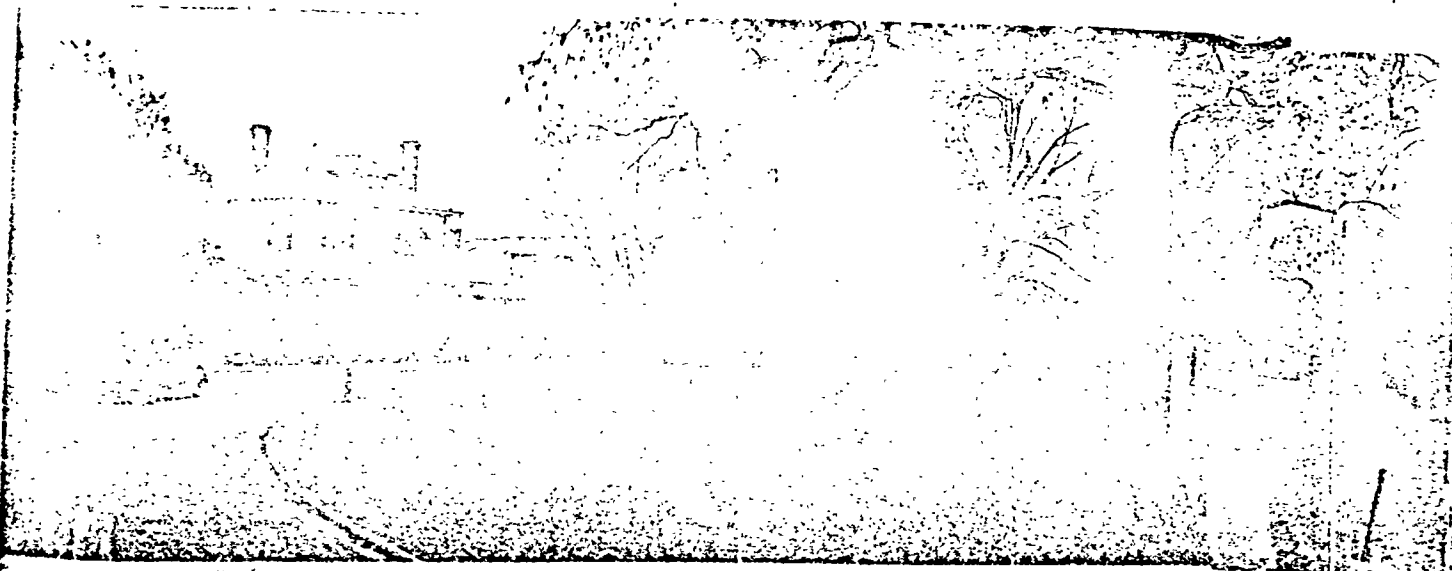
CENTER

MAP OF PETERSBURG VIRGINIA
 Showing Location of Historical Markers and Sites.
 Prepared by Office of City Engineer - March 25, 1932.
 Scale: 1" = 1200' W.R.C.



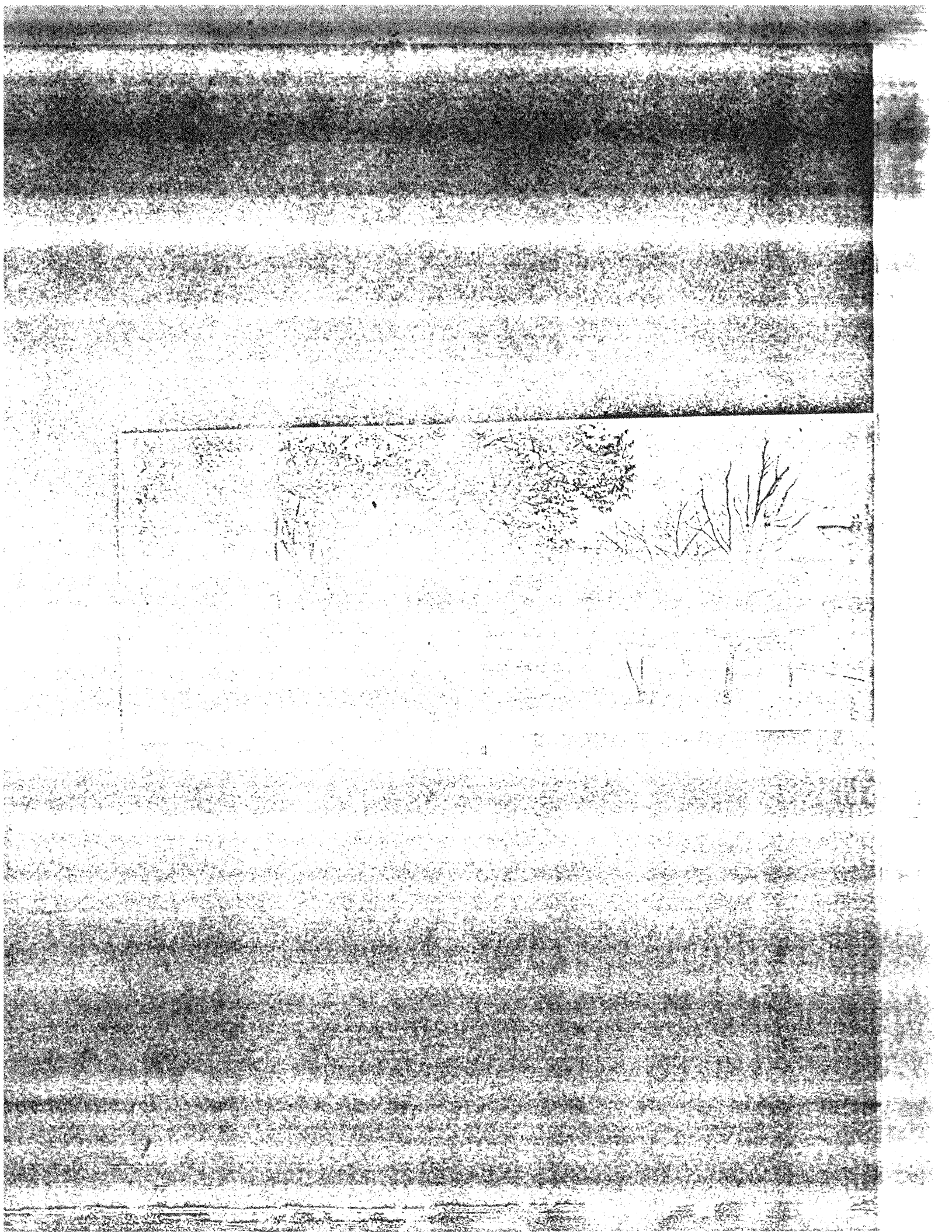
ENTRANCE TO "CENTER HILL"

DECEMBER 1936



VIEW FROM THE SOUTH PORCH OF "CENTER HILL"

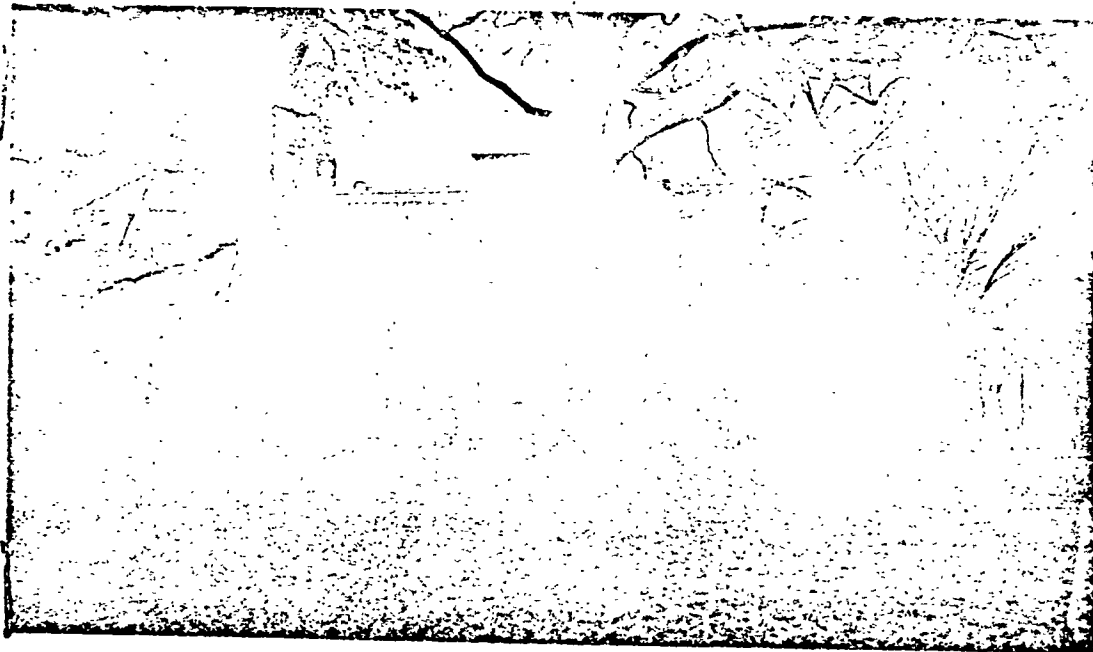
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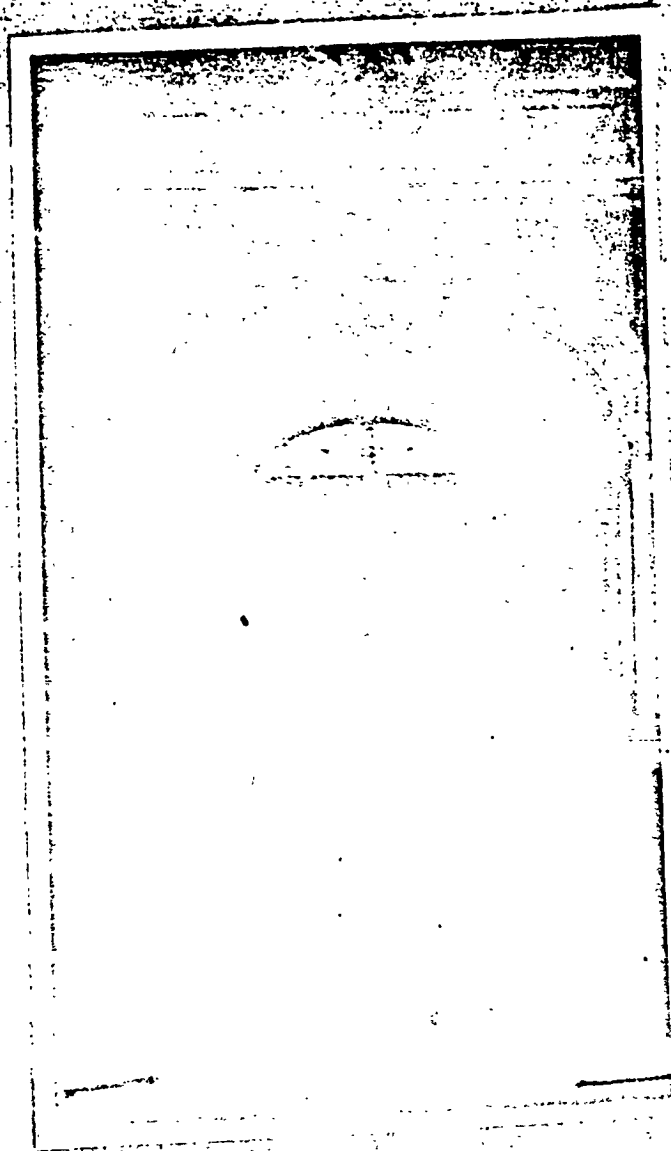
SOUTH FACADE

SUMMER 1936



SOUTH FACADE

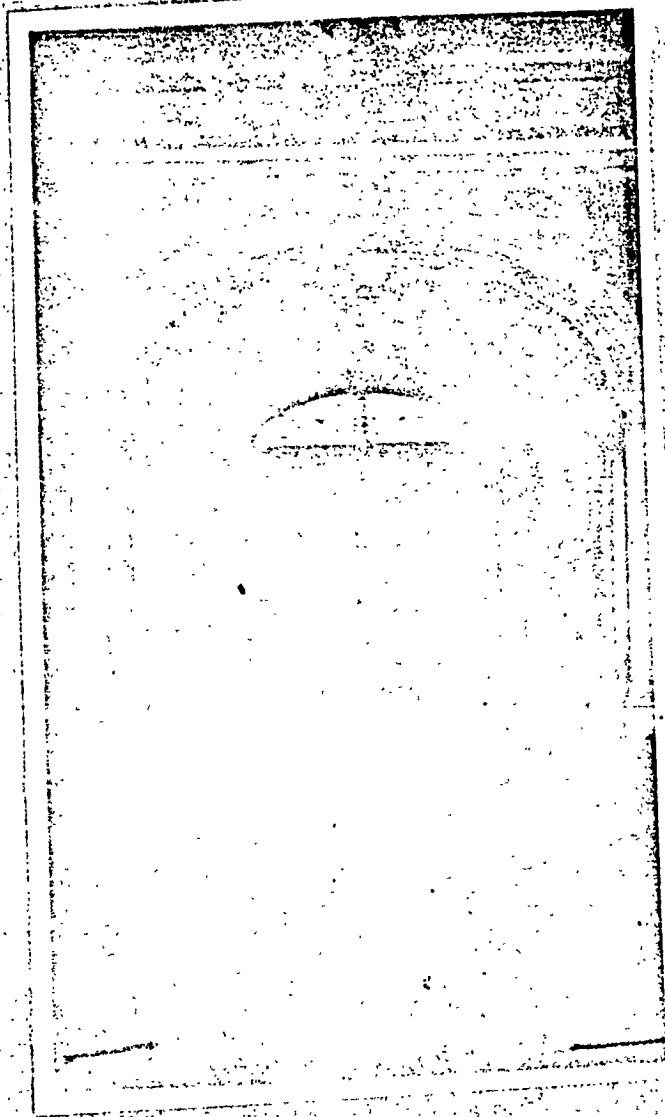
DECEMBER 1936



CENTRAL HALLWAY

FIRST FLOOR

DECEMBER 1936



CENTRAL HALLWAY

FIRST FLOOR

DECEMBER 1936