

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Mary Wilkins Freeman House
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 207 Lake Avenue not for publication
city or town Metuchen Borough vicinity
state New Jersey code NJ county Middlesex zip code 08840

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Deputy SHPO Assistant Commissioner for Natural & Historic Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain:) _____ _____	_____	_____

Mary Wilkins Freeman House
Name of Property

Middlesex County, NJ
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
_____	_____	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC / single dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC / single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Italianate

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

walls asbestos, wood

roof asphalt

other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8 Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria considerations

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

LITERATURE

Period of Significance

1902-1907

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Freeman, Mary Wilkins

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Primary location of additional data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, Metuchen, NJ

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Borough of Metuchen
Middlesex County, New Jersey

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Description Narrative

Summary Paragraph

The Mary Wilkins Freeman House at 207 Lake Avenue, Metuchen, is a 2½-story, 3-bay L-shaped Italianate-style house built ca.1868. The house is of balloon-frame construction and has a stucco-covered brick raised basement level, asbestos shingles over horizontal lapped wood siding, 2/2 original windows, and an asphalt gable roof with bracketed overhanging eaves and gable end returns and one interior chimney (see photo 1). The house faces east, is flanked by a driveway to the north and a large side yard to the south, and it stands approximately 30 feet back from a residential street on a large irregularly-shaped half-acre lot. Landscaping features include a bluestone sidewalk, a low dry-laid stone retaining wall that runs the entire length of the façade, flowering shrubs and small trees in the front yard, a row of trees along the northern property line, multiple shrubs and flower beds in the side and rear yards, a brick walkway that extends along the south side of the house between the sidewalk and the rear yard, and a rectangular concrete pad in the back yard (see photo 2) where a garage was located, as well as an octagonal concrete patio where a gazebo once stood. The current owners have conducted a campaign of ongoing restoration since their purchase in 2003.

Exterior

The raised basement level consists of brick covered with smooth stucco. The stucco underneath the façade porch and on the rear (west) elevation is scored to emulate stone, indicating that this treatment was probably used at one time on the entire raised basement level. The front entrance is accessed via two sets of brick stairs with bluestone caps that lead from the bluestone sidewalk to the front porch. Both the lower three stairs and the upper five stairs are flanked by brick piers with bluestone caps and have metal railings on the north side; the lower stairs are flanked by the stone retaining wall (see photo 1).

The front porch extends across the façade's central and southern bays and wraps around onto the beginning of the south side elevation (see photos 5 and 6). At the southeast corner of the porch is a turret-shaped feature that was added when the porch was extended. Although the exact date of this alteration is unknown, it is not shown in an early twentieth century photograph taken during the 1902-1907 time period when Mary Wilkins Freeman lived in the house; however, it is shown in an early 1930s photograph (compare the ca.1905 postcard view and the two 1930s views by Grimstead). It is likely, therefore, that the turret was added during the Von Hartz family's long ownership of the house starting in 1916. The photograph from the time period when the Freemans lived in the house also shows that prior to the extension of the porch, there was access to the basement level by a walkway that entered at the south end of the porch. By the time of the early 1930s photographs, there is extensive growth of shrubs at the end of the extended porch, indicating that the entrance to the basement level was no longer in this area. Despite this change, the door underneath the porch is extant. The entire porch has a painted wooden floor, which extends outward opposite the front door; a half-height railing with horizontal clapboard siding that replaced the original sawn balustrade; slender paired vertical and single horizontal framing posts that extend above the railing and are original in all of the porch except for the addition; and a flat roof with

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overhanging eaves, paired brackets, and a denticulated cornice.

The northern bay of the façade consists of a 2½-story projecting section with a gable-end-to-street and prominent gable end returns (see photo 1). The first two stories have slender paired windows that originally opened up to small balconies with flat sawn railings and finials; the attic level has small paired arched 1/1 windows with large arched window hoods. The façade's central entrance bay consists of the small projecting area of the porch that is flanked by two large scroll brackets. The paired front doors (see photo 3) were salvaged from a late-nineteenth-century building and installed at 207 Lake Avenue in 2017 when the single doorway was rehabilitated with paired doors that have wood panels in the lower portion and etched glass in the upper portion, a treatment apparently quite similar to that shown in the 1905 historic photo. There is a two-light transom above the doors and a restored wood door surround that has dentils similar to the porch cornice. Both the door surround and the transom molding have a trim design that was used throughout the house, i.e., inset panels with projecting trim. The 2017 work was guided by the physical evidence that—similar to the current condition of many of the exterior window stiles in the house (see photo 4)—revealed the extant inset panels and the indications in the paint lines that there had at one time been trim on top. As part of the restoration, the current homeowners replicated the historic trim, using the extant trim on the interior vestibule doorway. The second floor of the entrance bay has a rectangular fixed single-pane window. The façade's southern bay consists of slender paired doors on the first floor and a 2/2 window on the second floor.

The south side elevation (see photo 5) contains a three-story bay that has four windows each at the ground level, first floor, and second floor. The central first floor windows in the bay are two small fixed twelve-pane rectangular windows that replaced the original paired 2/2 windows. All other windows are original 2/2 windows. The bay has a flat roof with an overhanging eave with paired brackets. At the attic level there is a small square window.

At the rear of the house there is a 2½-story extension (see photo 6) with an intersecting gable roof with prominent gable end returns. The south side elevation of the rear extension has two bays with the eastern bay containing in the raised basement level the current entrance to the basement apartment, on the first-floor level paired 2/2 windows that were added in 2004 to replace two ca. 1970 casement windows, and on the second-floor level a single 2/2 window. The western bay has single 2/2 windows on each of the three floors.

The rear (west) elevation of the house has two portions (see photo 7); the southern part at the end of the rear extension has three single windows, including a small 2/2 window on the first floor, a larger 2/2 window on the second floor, and an arched 2/2 window in the attic gable end. In addition, there is a wooden stairway leading to a small one-story enclosed porch. This staircase was added in 2010 to replace an older staircase that ran along the back of the house from the porch door. The porch addition, which wraps around to the north elevation of the rear extension, contains a wood paneled door on its south

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elevation, fixed-pane windows on the southern portion, a small 2/2 window on the rear (west) elevation, and on the north elevation a basement-level double door that leads to a storage area under the porch, a 2/2 window in the raised basement level, a 2/2 window and a small window on the first-floor level, and two 2/2 windows on the second-floor level (see photo 8).

The one-bay section of the west elevation that is north of the rear extension contains a single 2/2 window on the basement, first, and second floor levels and a small square window in the attic gable end. On the main block of the house, the north elevation has two bays and a central gable peak (see photo 9). The westernmost bay close to the rear of the house has a single 2/2 window on each level. The easternmost bay close to the front of the house has a bowed bay window with three 2/2 windows on the basement and first floors, and a single 2/2 window on the second floor.

Interior – First Floor

The front entrance leads to a small vestibule (see photo 10) that opens directly into a center hall that runs the length of the house (see photo 11). The doorway between the vestibule and the hallway has molding with projecting arched detailing similar to what was originally on the exterior door and window molding. Throughout the first floor, there is wide molding that reveals evidence of graining underneath the paint and ten-foot-high ceilings that have been replaced with plasterboard.

The central hallway, with molded baseboards, door surrounds, and crown molding, replacement hardwood oak floors, plaster wall, and a bead board ceiling, originally provided access to four staircases, a front staircase to the second floor with a front staircase down to the basement directly below it, and a rear staircase to the second floor with a rear staircase down to the basement directly below it. The front staircase, located immediately past the vestibule, has a turned newel post, fluted spindles, and banister, all made of walnut. The wall in the hallway that runs along the side of the stairs has painted paneled wainscoting. At the rear of this staircase, in the small north-south hallway area (see photo 12) that connects the doorway into the rear parlor and the doorway into the current sitting room is the four-panel door that leads down to the basement. To the rear of this small hallway is an open framed doorway (see photo 13) that has a molded door surround and that connects the front part of the central hall to the rear part. Immediately inside the rear part of the hallway, there is a four-panel wood door on the northern side of the hall. This doorway originally led to the rear stairs to the basement; however, the stairs had to be removed in 2004 because of structural issues. At that time, a powder room was added in what was originally the entrance to the stairway. In the hallway opposite the powder room was the chase for the dumbwaiter, which went from the basement to the first floor for delivering meals and to the second floor for laundry.

The front portion of the hall contains four doorways, two opposite each other in front of the main staircase, and two opposite each other behind the main staircase. The doorways on the north side of the hall lead to the front and rear parlors. The front parlor, where Mary Wilkins and Charles Freeman were

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married, is in the northeast corner of the house and contains along the north wall the bay window (see photo 14) with an arched opening flanked by two large console brackets (see photo 15). On the east wall of the front parlor there are slender paired windows that originally opened up onto a small balcony; on the west wall there is a fireplace centered between the two large four-panel bi-fold doors leading into the back parlor (see photo 16). The fireplace has a painted granite surround with a black granite mantle and a cast iron fireplace decorative cover (see photo 17). The northernmost doorway between the two parlors had been closed off to create a closet within both rooms, fortunately retaining the original doors. In 2004, the closets were removed; in 2015 the doors were returned to their original locations, and the missing plaster crown molding and doorway molding were restored.

The back parlor located in the northwest corner of the house served as the Freemans' library and is now used as the dining room (see photo 18). The front and rear parlors have Douglas fir floors, plaster walls, wide baseboard, window, door, and crown molding, inset panels below the windows, and plaster ceiling medallions that were added in 2018 (see photo 19). The doors leading into the two parlors have four panels (see photo 20) with wide molding and original white porcelain knobs and escutcheons and original lift-off hinges.

The two doorways across the hall from the parlors open into a large room (see photo 21), although the rear doorway had been closed off and was reopened in 2016. This room served as the Freemans' dining room and is presently used as a sitting room. It has Douglas fir floors, plaster board walls, and molded baseboards, picture rail, window, and door molding. The original chimney in this room was removed in 1978 and replaced with a Heatilator fireplace that was removed in 2018. There are two additional doorways in this room: the double doors on the east end that lead out to the porch (see photo 22), and the open doorway on the west end that leads into the present-day kitchen.

Located in the southwest corner of the house, the kitchen (see photo 23) was totally renovated in 2006 and now has replacement oak floors, new molding that replicates the molding in the front rooms, and a plasterboard ceiling. On the south wall of the kitchen is one of the few extant historic features in the room, i.e., the remaining portion of an interior chimney that appears in an early 1930s photograph. During the 2006 renovation, a round chimney vent was uncovered, indicating that a small stove was used at one point for heating this present-day kitchen. Subsequent to the time of the 1930s photograph, the portion of the chimney above the attic floor level was removed.

At the rear of the house, the back hall ends opposite the back door (see photo 24), which has two panels in the lower portion, four panes of glass in the upper portion, and a mechanical twist doorbell. To the south of the hall, the space opens up to the kitchen; to the north are the rear stairs to the second floor. Past the rear staircase are two small rooms that are located in the one-story porch addition: a pantry and a laundry room (see photo 25). The pantry built-in cabinets that are located on the west wall were added by the current homeowners and are not original to the house.

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Interior – Second Floor

The front stairs to the second floor lead to a central second-floor hallway (see photo 26) with replacement oak floors, a walnut balustrade along the side of the front staircase, and 9-foot-high ceilings that are throughout the second floor. Similar to the first-floor layout, the front hallway contains four doorways, two opposite each other in front of the staircase, and two opposite each other behind the staircase. These doorways have four-panel doors with molding that is less ornate than those on the first floor. The door into the northeast corner of the house is intact, but it has been fixed in place to accommodate a new closet inside the master bedroom. In 2019, late-twentieth-century brass doorknobs were removed from these doors and box locks with white porcelain doorknobs were installed, using the visible outline of the original box locks as a guide. At the front of the house, in the small north-south hallway area that connects the two bedroom doors is the doorway that leads to the attic stairs that are directly above the main stairs. This door is a beadboard door with a black iron latch.

The three bedrooms in the front of the house, all three of which retain their original Douglas fir wood floors and wide baseboard, window, and door molding, mirror the size and shape of the rooms below. The northeast front bedroom (see photo 27) has inset wood panels below the two windows (see photo 28), and plaster crown molding. The bedroom (see photo 29) at the top of the stairs on the northwest side of the house retains its baseboard, window, and door molding; however, crown molding was missing and was replicated in 2018, when a new closet was added along with replicated door molding around the closet door.

The master bedroom suite, which runs along the south side of the house, consists of three rooms, internally connected to each other: a bedroom in the southeast corner (see photo 30) that is the same size as the room below, a small connected room possibly used as a changing room or a study (see photo 31), and the master bathroom in the southwest corner. The bedroom has original baseboard molding and a wide curved bay with original plaster corbels on either side. During the 2018 renovations, the 1978 Heatilator fireplace was removed, closets and a built-in bureau were installed, and replicated crown molding was added. In addition, a closet was added to the small changing room.

Similar to the first-floor layout, there is a doorway (see photo 32) between the front and rear portions of the hallway. The rear portion of the hallway contains two doors on the south wall: a small door that opens to the last remaining chase of the dumbwaiter, which now houses air conditioning duct work from the attic and the second floor electric panel, and a door (see photo 33) that leads to the small “changing room” from which there is access to both the master bedroom and the master bathroom. At the end of the rear hall is the doorway into the main bathroom. The doorways into both the master bathroom and the main bathroom appear original; however, the door into the master bath had been previously closed off and the entire space functioned as one large bathroom. During restoration work in 2004, a wall was built to divide the room between the doorways, thus creating two bathrooms. The original clawfoot tub has been

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restored and is located in the current master bathroom. To the north of the rear hallway are the back stairs (see photo 33) coming up from the first floor. The staircase has a small open landing, turned walnut newel post, and simple turned walnut spindles.

Interior – Basement

The majority of the basement level consists of a renovated apartment that is accessed from the outside entrance on the south elevation. Although there is very little historic fabric in this portion of the house, the following features were uncovered during the 2004 renovations: an oversized fireplace at the bottom of the chimney on the south elevation, a kitchen sink, and a bathroom sink and clawfoot bathtub in what is presumed to have been the living quarters for the household help. The northwest portion of the basement contains a small unfinished area used for the furnace and storage.

Alterations / Integrity

Historic photographs dating to the time that Mary Wilkins Freeman lived in the house indicate that the changes to the exterior include removal of decorative trim and shutters; extension of the front porch and removal of the windows that enclosed the porch, and the loss of some of the brackets around the cornice line. However, the current homeowners have undertaken numerous restoration steps, including restoring the original lead-lined Yankee gutters and relining them with copper, returning the front entrance to a double rather than single door and restoring the door surround and transom, removing the closets in the parlors and re-opening the second doorway between the two rooms, re-opening the rear door from the hallway into the former dining room; restoring interior features such as molding and door hardware, using existing molding as a template and the markings of the paint to determine the appropriate hardware, replacing missing stairway spindles and all missing woodwork, making sure to produce exact replications, and using Douglas fir from the master bathroom to fill in the holes in the master bedroom floor created by the Heatilator.

Although there are still missing ornate features on the exterior, overall the house has retained a high level of architectural integrity, including its basic floor plan, and numerous historic features have been carefully restored. Mary Wilkins Freeman would certainly recognize it as the house that she described in humor in 1901 when she said “I have a home in Metuchen with twenty-eight doors and five pairs of stairs, otherwise it is quite pretty. I suppose I shall spend most of my time, being naturally of a somewhat undecided turn, trying to decide which door to go in or out of, and what stairs to descend.”¹

¹ Kendrick, 257, #317.

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Significance Statement

Summary Paragraph

The Mary Wilkins Freeman House at 207 Lake Avenue, Metuchen, is significant at the state level under Criterion B in the history of American literature as the only extant house associated with the writing career of noted author Mary Wilkins Freeman, who was married in this home and lived there with her husband, Dr. Charles Freeman, from 1902 to 1907, during a time when she actively pursued her writing career. Freeman was well known for her short stories in which—representative of the late nineteenth century writers called “local colorists”—she depicted her characters and environments in a realistic manner. Born and raised in New England, Freeman depicted life in New England small towns and explored the role of women and the struggles they faced. During her lifetime, she wrote twenty-two volumes of short stories, over fifty uncollected short stories and prose essays, fourteen novels, three plays, three volumes of poetry, and one motion picture script¹ and was well-known throughout the United States and abroad. Although her fame had somewhat subsided by the end of her life, there has been a resurgence of interest in her within the literary community, with several late-twentieth-century compilations and studies of her work. Freeman was described in Mary R. Reichardt’s 1997 *Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader* as holding “a significant position in the history of American women’s fiction in general and in the development of the American short story in particular,”² and in James F. Broderick’s 2003 *Paging New Jersey: A Literary Guide to the Garden State* as “one of the most significant and widely acclaimed women writers in American literature during the late 1880’s, the 1890’s, and the early 1900’s.”³

Mary’s Early Years

Mary Eleanor Wilkins was born on October 31, 1852 in Randolph, Massachusetts⁴ to Warren E. and Eleanor (Lothrop) Wilkins.⁵ In 1867, when she was 15 years old, her family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, where Freeman graduated from Brattleboro High School in 1870, attended Mount Holyoke Seminary for one year, and continued her education at Mrs. Hosford’s Glenwood Seminary. Following her schooling, she worked as a teacher for one year and wrote some religious and children’s poetry.⁶

Freeman’s strict New England Puritan upbringing and some of the challenges in her youth influenced her later writing. As described by Reichardt, Freeman’s stories were “[u]sually set in Post-Civil War

¹ Brent L. Kendrick, ed. *The Infant Sphinx, Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 4.

² Mary R. Reichardt, ed., *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), xviii.

³ Kendrick, 1.

⁴ Wheeler Preston, *American Biographies* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 343.

⁵ John James Scannell, ed., *Scannell’s New Jersey’s First Citizen’s and State Guide 1919-1920* (Paterson: J. J. Scannell, 1919), 166.

⁶ James F. Broderick, *Paging New Jersey, A Literary Guide to the Garden State* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 37.

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New England villages much like the shoe-manufacturing Massachusetts town of Freeman's youth...[and] most often concern characters striving to maintain their dignity or independence in the face of some threat."⁷ The challenges she experienced in her youth included financial issues, with her family moving into the home of the wealthy Reverend Thomas Tyler so that Mary's mother, Eleanor, could serve as his housekeeper; Freeman's unrequited love for Reverend Tyler's son, Hanson; and the death of her only sibling, Anna, and her parents within a seven-year period from 1876 to 1883.

Mary's Early Career Development

Mary Wilkins received her first payment for her writing in the early 1880s while she was still living in Brattleboro, Vermont. Historians attribute her first payment as \$10 for the 1881 publication of "The Beggar King" in the children's magazine, *Wide Awake*.⁸ In 1904, Wilkins Freeman wrote in a letter—apparently responding to an inquiry as to when she received her first payment—about two payments received in the early 1880s:

I think the first check for a story was one for twentyfive dollars from the editor of Harper's Bazar. The story was called Two Old Lovers, and is included in the collection called "Humble Romance." It is possible however that my first story check came from The Boston Sunday Budget. I won a prize of fifty dollars for a short story which was offered by that paper, and I am not sure whether that or the twentyfive for The Two Old Lovers came first. One thing I do know: those checks seemed very large indeed to me."⁹

Biographers attribute the money for "Two Old Lovers" as being in 1882 and the prize money for winning a Boston weekly newspaper's contest for the best short story as having taken place in 1883.¹⁰

Mary Wilkins Freeman's early writing career was aided by Mary Louise Booth, editor of *Harper's Bazar*, who is credited with "discovering" Freeman in 1882 when she favorably reviewed and agreed to publish Freeman's short story "Two Old Lovers." The two women developed a professional relationship, with Booth serving as a mentor for Freeman, often helping to review and publish her stories, and providing Freeman a chance to meet writers and publishers at Booth's Saturday evening receptions.¹¹

When Freeman's father passed away in 1883, she returned to Randolph, Massachusetts and moved in with the family of a childhood friend, Mary Wales, at 361 S. Main Street, a house that was demolished in the 1970s. According to Glasser, the years that the two women lived together (1883-1902) "were the richest in Freeman's literary career... [when] Freeman had the chance to develop a sense of herself

⁷ Reichardt, ix-x.

⁸ Leah Blatt Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden, The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 30.

⁹ Kendrick, 297-298, #344.

¹⁰ Kat Upson Clark, "Literary Women in Their Homes II: Mary Eleanor Wilkins," *The Ladies' Home Journal* (August 1892), as cited in <https://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/freemanhome.htm>.

¹¹ "Mary E. Wilkins At Home." *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, L, No. 3 (July 1900) as cited in Hill, Katharine, <http://wilkinsfreeman.info/About/MaryEWilkinsAtHome.htm>.

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as a writer most fully.”¹² During this nineteen-year time period Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote approximately 161 of the 291 works she produced over the course of her lifetime, many of which are attributed to be among her best. It was also during this time period that she achieved success as an author and became well known throughout the country and internationally.

Mary Wilkins Freeman began her career writing short stories, with her stories published in *Harper's Bazar* and *Harper's New Monthly*. In 1887, the stories published in *Harper's* were compiled in a collection entitled *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*.¹³ Between 1883 and 1889, 52 of Freeman's adult short stories were published (49 in *Harper's Bazar*, *Harper's Monthly*, or *Harper's Weekly*, and three in *Lippincott's Magazine*, *The Detroit Free Press*, and *Cosmopolitan*).¹⁴ Major work from this time period includes:

- *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1889), her first book, which Scannell praised as “the first revelation of her skill in drawing homely sketches, always accurate, in the simplest homeliest words and giving an air of vivid reality to the settings.”¹⁵ William Dean Howells, author/editor/literary critic, deemed the stories as among the “best modern work everywhere” due to their “directness and simplicity.”¹⁶
- *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), which received many favorable reviews including the comment by *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* (“*The Critic*”) that “So true in their insight into human nature, so brief and salient in construction, so deep in feeling, so choice in expression, these stories rank even with the works of Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett.”¹⁷ Howells described the stories as “as good in their way as anything ever done amongst us; that is, among any people.”¹⁸ *The Atlantic Monthly* stated “Of the genuine originality of these stories it is hard to speak too strongly.”¹⁹
- *The Revolt of Mother* (1891)
- *Giles Corey, Yeoman* (1893), which was adapted for a play performed in Boston by the Theatre of Arts and Letters²⁰ and was read before the Summer School of History and Romance at Deerfield.²¹

As more of her stories were published, Freeman became increasingly popular both within the United States and internationally. In an 1890 poll conducted by *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature*

¹² Glasser, 31.

¹³ Glasser, 54.

¹⁴ Reichardt, vii.

¹⁵ Scannell, 167.

¹⁶ “Editor’s Study,” *Harper's*, 75 (September 1887), 640 as cited in Kendrick, 2.

¹⁷ “Recent Fiction,” *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* NS 15 (May 30, 1891), 286, as cited in Kendrick, 54.

¹⁸ “Editor’s Study,” *Harper's* 83 (June 1891), 156, as cited in Kendrick, 2.

¹⁹ “New England in the Short Story,” *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (June 1891), 848.

²⁰ Scannell, 167.

²¹ Clark.

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and the Arts, Freeman was voted to be among the top twenty “writers whom our readers deem the truest representatives of what is best in cultivated American womanhood.”²² In an 1897 poll by the same publication, her short story “The Revolt of Mother” was voted to be among the twelve best American short stories, along with Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Snow Image.” Her short story “A Humble Romance” was voted in the second-best list along with Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark,” and Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”²³

Her fame abroad is reflected in an 1890 comment in *The Critic* that “There is something like a craze in England over Mary E. Wilkins.”²⁴ On August 27, 1891, Freeman’s publisher in England wrote to her:

Dear Madam:

I do not know why I should not tell you what I am sure you will be interested to hear; that Mr. Henry James who is a dear friend of mine, has lately been taken with an enormous enthusiasm for your stories. He has been reading them all one after another—both volumes—and has the greatest opinion of them....²⁵

Her 1894 novel *Pembroke* was praised by the English press by the comment that “George Elliot had never done anything finer,”²⁶ and by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as “the greatest piece of fiction in America since *The Scarlet Letter*.”²⁷ According to archivist Brent L. Kendrick, who in 1985 published a collection of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s letters, “Her works were issued frequently in both American and English editions, and many were translated into French, German, Czech, and Russian.”²⁸

Writing Diversity

After 1891, Freeman expanded her writing styles in several ways. She tried new themes for her short stories, moving beyond the realism of New England small towns; wrote historical narratives; experimented with symbolism and mysticism in eleven short stories; and branched into producing novels, poetry, plays, children’s stories, nonfiction prose, and motion-picture scripts.²⁹

By the time Freeman experimented with novels and other forms of literature, she had gained enough fame and financial stability that she could afford to take some risks. With the exception of *Madelon*,

²² “And Now for ‘Twenty Immortelles,’” *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* NS 14 (August 30, 1890): 108, and “The Twenty Immortelles,” *The Critic* NS 14 (October 25, 1890): 206, as cited in Kendrick, 1.

²³ “The Best Twelve American Stories,” *The Critic* NS 27 (April 10, 1897): 245, as cited in Kendrick, 1-2.

²⁴ Fred Lewis Pattee, “On the Terminal Moraine of New England Puritanism,” *Sidelights on American Literature* (1922): 186, as cited in Edward Foster, *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (New York: Hendricks House, 1956), 89.

²⁵ Letter from the collection of Judge Thomas Brown, Perth Amboy, N.J., as cited in Foster, 89.

²⁶ Scannell, 167.

²⁷ Reichardt, 3.

²⁸ Kendrick, 1.

²⁹ Reichardt, xiii.

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her novels were first published as serials, resulting in her receiving payments for the serials as well as royalties. She received \$2,500 in serial payments for *Pembroke* and \$3,000 for *Jerome*. In addition, her later novels received a higher royalty than her earlier novels. In 1893, she received a 10% royalty for *Jane Field*; for her later novels she received a 15% royalty. Thanks to her increased payments, by 1895, she had “cash assets exceeding \$10,000.”³⁰

According to Glasser, Freeman’s novels explored “the complexity of female sexuality and the politics of patriarchy.” In the 1890s, she wrote several novels, including *Jane Field* (1893, her first novel); *Jerome*, *A Poor Man* (1893); *Pembroke* (1894); and *Madelon* (1896). Glasser described *Pembroke* and *Madelon* as having “layers of unexpected meaning in subtle moments in women’s kitchens, in the words or faces of lovers and friends engaged in simple activities: baking pies, picking cherries, sitting on a sofa in the parlor...it becomes possible to read Freeman’s novels beside the novels of her male contemporaries Mark Twain and Henry James and to evaluate them in terms of ‘the complex meaning of everyday things in women’s quests,’ to ‘decode’ by moving beyond traditional male definitions of what constitutes meaning.”³¹ Freeman’s later novels included *The Portion of Labor* (1901), *By the Light of the Soul* (1906), and *The Shoulders of Atlas* (1908).

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s writing career, especially her ties to *Harpers*, afforded her the opportunity to meet many other literary figures, including authors, publishers, and editors. Freeman developed relationships with writers Sarah Orne Jewett, Hamlin Garland, and Lafcadio Hearn; editors Kate Upson Clark and Henry Mills Alden; author/editor/literary critic William Dean Howells, to whom she was considered a protégée; and author/*The Atlantic Monthly* Editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich. In December 1905, *Harpers* president Colonel George Harvey invited the Freemans to a banquet at Delmonico’s in New York City in honor of Samuel Clemens’ (Mark Twain) 70th birthday. As reported in *The New York Times*, when it was time for the 170 guests to proceed into dinner, “Mr. Clemens led the way, with Mrs. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman on his arm.” A photograph in that news article shows Clemens seated at dinner with Mary Wilkins Freeman by his side.³²

Transition to Metuchen

Mary Wilkins frequently visited *Harper’s New Monthly* Editor Henry Mills Alden in his Metuchen home, where she became friends with Alden’s daughters and in 1892 met her future husband, Dr. Charles Manning Freeman.³³ Trained as a medical doctor, Dr. Freeman had stopped practicing medicine in 1889 in order to work in the family business, Manning Freeman and Son Coal and Lumber Company. In 1899, he became sole owner of the company when his father passed away; in 1905 he became president when the company incorporated.³⁴

³⁰ Glasser, 128.

³¹ “Celebrate Mark Twain’s Seventieth Birthday,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1905.

³² Edward Foster, 168.

³³ Kendrick, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

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After an extended courtship, Mary Wilkins and Dr. Freeman were married on January 1, 1902 in the front room of 207 Lake Avenue, a home they rented from Jeremiah Payne and lived in until 1907 when they built their own home further down Lake Avenue. According to a November 1901 article in the *New York Tribune*, 207 Lake Avenue had been completely renovated prior to the Freemans moving in.³⁵ On December 22, 1901, Freeman wrote to a friend that “At last our house is ready, it has taken as much time as to build a new one.”³⁶

The house at 207 Lake Avenue was constructed ca. 1868, when the “land and premises” were sold by David G. Thomas to Henry Coan. The following year, Coan sold the property to Jeremiah Payne, who in 1872 sold “2 parcels of land and buildings” to Charles Mundy. The property then stayed in the Mundy family, passing to various family members, until 1901 when it was sold at a sheriff’s sale back to Jeremiah Payne.³⁷

Subsequent to the Freemans leaving the house, Payne sold it in 1907 to Hugh Janeway, who sold it to Ernest Von Hartz in 1916. The property stayed within the Von Hartz family until 1964, with some reduction in the lot size due to the family subdividing and separating out the property at Spring Street and Lake Avenue. In 1964, the property with the house was sold to Robert Rogers; in 1974 to Michael Lyons; in 1978 to Neal Clemens; and in 2003 to Robert Seely.³⁸

Some information about the house at 207 Lake Avenue appears in Freeman’s letters as well as in press stories about her. On December 22, 1901, shortly before her wedding, she wrote to her friend Evelyn, showing her humor when she described the house as well as her personal situation:

At this extremely late hour of the day [referring to her age], I am about to be married. Early in January, the day I don’t even mention in my prayers, on account of the newspapers...

...The unfortunate man’s name is Dr. Chas. M. Freeman...

I have a home in Metuchen with twenty-eight doors and five pairs of stairs, otherwise it is quite pretty. I suppose I shall spend most of my time, being naturally of a somewhat undecided turn, trying to decide which door to go in or out of, and what stairs to descend.³⁹

In an April 1902 letter, she discusses her “lovely dining-room” and her wishes that the dumb waiter would work.⁴⁰ In another letter the same month, she writes “My grounds are lovely. I always wanted evergreen trees, and now I have them, such beauties, with their branches resting on the ground, and there are lots of flowering shrubs, which I am watching with a great deal of interest. And there is the

³⁵ “Miss M. E. Wilkins Married,” *New York Tribune* (November 16, 1901): 9, as cited in Kendrick, 262.

³⁶ Letter #316, December 22, 1901 letter Mary E. Wilkins to Harriet Randolph Hyatt Mayor, as cited in Kendrick, 256.

³⁷ Deeds, Middlesex County Courthouse.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kendrick, 257, #317.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 286, #322.

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loveliest birch tree that I ever saw right opposite my window. If our very souls were not harassed by drainage, the whole would appear sort of Eden. It's really a very pretty place."⁴¹

A May 31, 1903 article in the *New York Herald* entitled "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman at Home at Metuchen, N.J." described the Freemans' home as "a roomy white frame cottage with a queer little veranda in front" and a "neatly clipped lawn, with its flower beds." Once inside the front screen door, one saw a "long glass enclosed room to the side, where a tea table is spread among the fuchsias and cinerarias." Mrs. Freeman was upstairs as could be evidenced by the typewriter's incessant tick-tack." The parlor was described as having:

...quaint old fashioned red velvet furniture. It is just such a room as her most ardent admirer might design as a spacious and well furnished, nothing in it too new; no attempt whatever at so called 'artistic' effect. Just an old fashioned parlor, where folk used to plain living and high thinking might find sweet solace and comfortable chairs and where they might indulge in the gentle art of conversation on any subject whatever, from the planting of red cabbage to New England transcendentalism.

Emerson, Thoreau, Holmes, Browning and a half score of others smile benignantly in their frames from the tops of book shelves, and the big centre table is covered with books, new and old.⁴²

During the time she lived in the 207 Lake Avenue house, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote approximately 47 of her writings. Her extant letters from this time period are a mix of correspondence to friends describing her personal life, including mention of the conflict between her writing and her housework, and multiple letters to publishers and clients about her writing and publications. In April 1902, only three months after she married and moved into the house, she wrote to one friend:

I am very well, and doing a great deal of work. I have written a great deal since I was married, and besides have some care of my house...I have made up my mind, if my house is clean enough so that there is no immediate danger of typhoid, and we have enough to eat, it is the principal thing. Still I must admit, that there are times when I really wonder how I can do as much as I ought to do. It is actually doing a man's work and a woman's work at once, though my husband does everything that he possibly can to spare me..."⁴³

The letters related to her writing, which are the majority of her extant letters, provide some insight into her writing career. First, there are many letters negotiating prices and deadlines for submitting her work. These letters reveal that by the early twentieth century, she was able to negotiate for both more time and more money. In terms of the subject matter, she continued to write many holiday-related short stories. Over her lifetime, more than 50 of the 247 short stories she wrote relate to Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, or Halloween.⁴⁴ With the move to New Jersey, she used a mix of settings for

⁴¹ Ibid, 287, #323.

⁴² "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman at Home at Metuchen, N.J." *New York Herald* (May 31, 1903).

⁴³ Kendrick, 286-287, #323.

⁴⁴ Reichardt, xii.

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her stories. “Six Trees” (1903), *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural* (1903), and “The Givers” (1904) were still set in New England; however, *The Debtor* (1905) and “Doc.” Gordon (1906) were set in New Jersey. *The Debtor*, originally intended to be a serial for *Harper’s Bazar*, was published in book form. It was described as “[a] lengthy and weakly plotted novel of realistic and satiric tone” that “added nothing to her reputation.”⁴⁵ On May 4, 1904, two years after her wedding, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote to Harper & Bros. to remind them that—in accordance with her previous request—her full name of “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman” was to be used on all publications.⁴⁶

Her fame during the time she lived at 207 Lake Avenue is represented by the news stories, both announcing her new short stories and describing her personal life, that appeared in newspapers around the country. In June 1902, a Boston newspaper held a contest where they placed photographs of twelve prominent women in their Sunday edition and offered prizes to readers who could correctly identify all twelve women. The following Sunday they announced the women, which included Mary Wilkins Freeman along with Mrs. William McKinley, Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, Julia Ward Howe, and Clara Barton.⁴⁷

Second Metuchen Home (1907-1930)

In 1907, using money from her writing, Mary Wilkins Freeman purchased five acres of land a block up the street from their home at 207 Lake Avenue and had a large home built at 159 Lake Avenue. In May 1907 the Freemans moved into the house at 159 Lake Avenue, where she proceeded to write approximately 83 additional pieces of work.

In 1908, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote the novel *The Shoulders of Atlas* as part of the *New York Herald’s* “Anglo American Competition.” The newspaper printed installments of Freeman’s novel as well as English writer Max Pemberton’s novel *Sir Richard Escombe*, with the goal of having the public vote for their favorite novel. Freeman won by over 14,000 votes, receiving \$20,000 in prize and book rights.⁴⁸ In 1908, she also participated with several writers, including William Dean Howells and Henry James, in a collaborative novel entitled *The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors*. Howells wrote the first chapter entitled “The Father” and Wilkins Freeman wrote the second chapter entitled “The Old Maid Aunt,” but her co-authors were disappointed in her non-traditional depiction of the old maid.

Her writing during her time in her second home included stories still based on New England, including “By the Light of the Soul” (1907), “The Fair Lavinia and Others” (1907), *The Shoulders of Atlas* (1908), “The Winning Lady and Others” (1909), “The Green Door” (1910), “The Yates Pride” (1912), “The Copy-Cat and Other Stories” (1914), and *Edgewater People* (1918), as well as New Jersey-based

⁴⁵ Foster, 168.

⁴⁶ Kendrick, 299, #346.

⁴⁷ “Winners of the Sunday Post Photograph Contest of June 15,” *Boston Sunday Post* (June 22, 1902): 19.

⁴⁸ Foster, 174-176.

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stories, including “The Butterfly House” (1912), which was in the *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1911 and 1912 as “The Poor Lady,” and which was controversial due to the characters’ familiarity to Metuchenites.

In 1915, Mary Wilkins Freeman learned that her dear friend Mary Wales was terminally ill with cancer. When Wales passed away on August 4, 1916, Freeman suffered from “nervous exhaustion;” four months later, she wrote to a friend about the loss and how she had “not been well for a long time.”⁴⁹ According to Glasser, Freeman’s “prose after 1916 never matched the power of what she had written before Mary Wales’s death.”⁵⁰

In her 1997 *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*, editor Mary R. Reichardt describes how Freeman’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century popularity faded after World War I:

... Her output diminished considerably in her last decade...the post-World War I “masculine” mood of the country and corresponding changes in literary tastes had rendered her village themes and particular brand of “feminine” subject matter passe. So diminished was her reputation by the time of her death that Henry Wysham Lanier, who selected twenty-five stories for *The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins* in 1927, apologized in his preface for having to remind his audience who the author was: “Indeed, to one who was a reader in the nineties, it seems almost ludicrous to ‘introduce’ Mary E. Wilkins. (Just a little like introducing Babe Ruth anywhere in the United States, in these latter days!)”⁵¹

In the last decade of her life, both the quantity and the quality of her writing decreased. One of her last publications, the 1918 collection of short stories entitled *Edgewater People*, was considered one of her weakest works. Freeman increasingly struggled with marital issues due to Dr. Freeman’s problems with heavy drinking and drug addiction. In 1920, he was committed to the New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane in Trenton; in 1922, the couple legally separated and he moved in with his chauffeur. One year later, he passed away. A publicly fought battle ensued over his estate when Freeman learned that he had changed his will to leave her only \$1, with the remainder of his estimated \$100,000 going to his chauffeur. Freeman and Dr. Freeman’s two sisters took the matter to court and won.⁵²

Although the pace of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s writing slowed down in her later years, her fame did earn her several important honors. From 1913-1921, she served as an Honorary Vice-President of the Authors’ League of America.⁵³ In 1917, the Committee on Nominations of the National Institute of Arts and Letters nominated her for membership. The nomination was a noteworthy honor; however, she was not elected due to the Institute’s hesitancy to elect a woman.⁵⁴ In 1923, the ladies’ Metuchen

⁴⁹ Glasser, 178.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Reichardt, xv-xvi.

⁵² Kendrick, 369.

⁵³ “The First Annual Meeting,” *Authors’ League of America Bulletin* 1, No. 2 (June 1913): 6, as cited in Kendrick, 3.

⁵⁴ Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden*, 199.

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Borough Improvement League declared October 19th to be “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman Day...”⁵⁵ In conjunction with this honor, the *Metuchen Recorder* newspaper described Freeman as “the greatest literary genius residing in the Brainy Borough, who is one of the most widely known women in America and whose writings are also extensively read abroad...”⁵⁶ In 1925, the American Academy of Arts and Letters honored her by awarding her the first William Dean Howells Gold Medal for distinguished work in fiction.⁵⁷ A year later, the Academy elected her as one of the first women in the Academy’s Department of Literature, National Institute of Arts and Letters.⁵⁸ In 1927, Henry W. Lanier compiled the first anthology, entitled *The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins*.⁵⁹

In 1938, eight years after she passed away, the Academy honored her by installing at its 633 West 155 Street, New York entrance new bronze doors (still extant) bearing the inscription, “Dedicated to the Memory of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Women Writers of America.”⁶⁰

Wilkins Freeman continued to live in her 159 Lake Avenue house until she passed away on March 15, 1930; she is now interred in Hillside Cemetery in Plainfield, New Jersey. The house burned down around 1979.

Literary Significance

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s literary significance is three-fold: for the quality of her short stories, as a local colorist, and for her exploration of women and their struggles between traditional roles and independence. Her contribution to the genre of short stories writing was acknowledged in the 1919-1920 edition of *Scannell’s New Jersey’s First Citizen’s and State Guide*:

The short story tries the skill of the writer as never does the more elaborate novel. The power of framing a picture in a line is a rarer gift than the ability to frame it in a page. The short story is made by the incisive analysis that flashes the character to the mind of the reader in a single phrase; and authors agree that skill in producing it is the higher demonstration of literary genius. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman has for many years enjoyed the distinction of being the leader among the short story writers of this country.⁶¹

Through her short stories, Wilkins Freeman demonstrated her understanding of small town life in New England, especially focusing on the role of women. Richard Fusco, in his introduction to a 2003 edition of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, described how Realist writers were “[t]he

⁵⁵ “Mrs. Freeman is Honored by B. I. L. at Big Meeting,” *Metuchen Recorder* (October 19, 1923): 1, 4, as cited in Kendrick, 369.

⁵⁶ *Metuchen Recorder* (November 16, 1923), as cited in Kendrick, 370.

⁵⁷ “Address by Hamlin Garland on the Occasion of the Gold Medal for Fiction to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, April 23rd, 1926,” *American Academy an Institute of Arts and Letters*, as cited in Kendrick, 370.

⁵⁸ Kendrick, 370-371.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 372.

⁶⁰ “New Bronze Doors at American Academy Here,” *The New York Times* (March 6, 1938), as cited in Kendrick, 3.

⁶¹ Scannell, 167.

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dominant literary figures in the United States after the Civil War” with the local-color school of Realists “chronicling the lives and manners of the people they grew up with or lived among for a long time,” and he specifically mentioned this group including Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Rose Terry Cooke, Bret Harte, and George Washington Cable.⁶² Local colorists such as Mary Wilkins Freeman depicted life in small New England towns at a time when many young people were leaving either to migrate westward or to look for jobs in the industrializing cities. Freeman understood and wrote about “people of character who were used to hard work, eccentrics, and those who lacked the will or opportunities to move on.”⁶³

University of Maine English Professor Josephine Donovan identified five female authors as constituting the New England school of women local colorists: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins Freeman.⁶⁴ In the introduction to her 1988 book, *New England Local Color Literature, A Women’s Tradition*, Donovan explained how she selected these particular five authors:

Why restrict the list to these five? Why not Alice Brown, Helen Hunt Jackson, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Agnes Trumbull Slosson, Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Murfee, Kate Chopin, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Grace King, etc.? I chose these five because they form a recognizable school and because each illustrates significant moments in the evolution of this women’s literary tradition. Each was a major writer who produced an impressive volume of literature over a sustained period of time. With the possible exception of Phelps, all were great writers. Stowe, Cooke, Jewett, and Freeman produced works that are most certainly masterpieces, by any standards of critical judgment. Their relative obscurity is undeserved.⁶⁵

According to literary critic Fred Lewis Pattee, the mid-nineteenth century Realists, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rose Terry Cooke, infused their depiction of New England life with “sentiment and sensationalism;” later Realists such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman “knew nothing of the emotional fifties and sixties...[beginning their] “work when the new literature of actuality, the realism of Flaubert and Hardy and Howells, was in full domination.”⁶⁶ In particular, Pattee explained that “to her realism Miss Wilkins added a power usually denied her sex, the power of detachment, the epic power that excludes the subjective and hides the artist behind the picture.” Pattee proceeds to contrast Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *Gates Ajar*, where the reader sees the author’s “intense and emotional soul,” to Freeman’s “A Humble Romance,” where “we see only the grim lineaments of New England, a picture as remorseless and as startling as if a searchlight has been turned into the dim and cobwebbed recesses of an ancient vault. She stands not aloof like Miss Jewett; she is simply unseen. She is working in the materials of her own heart and drawing the outlines of her own home,

⁶² Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Short Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books), xxvii.

⁶³ <https://www.enotes.com/topics/mary-e-wilkins-freeman>

⁶⁴ Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature, A Women’s Tradition* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company), 1.

⁶⁵ Donovan, 10.

⁶⁶ Pattee, 12.

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yet she possesses the epic power to keep her creations impersonal to the point of anonymousness.”⁶⁷ He also described Freeman as “equal to [Hawthorne] in her command of pathos and of emotional intensity, [she] was able to surpass him in her command of gripping situation and her powers of characterization. Of the generation born since the [Civil] war she alone may be compared with this earliest depicter of the New England soul.”⁶⁸

Professor Glasser’s study of Mary Wilkins Freeman focuses on Freeman’s contribution to early feminist literature, maintaining that seeing Freeman solely as a local colorist “has tended to minimize her work. Certainly she does offer a vivid sense of life in New England. Most significant, however, is the way in which she moves beyond region to offer a focus on the psychology of women’s conflicts at the turn of the century.”⁶⁹ Glasser analyzes Freeman’s many stories in which she presented heroines who were “torn between a desire for personal independence and the pressures of conforming to a patriarchal society,”⁷⁰ including “Gentian” (1887), “A New England Nun” (1891), “The Revolt of Mother” (1891), “A Church Mouse” (1891), and “Old Woman Magoun” (1909) “A Moral Exigency” “Louisa,” “Arethusa” (1901), “One Good Time” (1900), “Christmas Jenny” “Lombardy Poplar,” “The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin,” and “Old Maid Aunt.” Glasser describes how writing provided Freeman with a “chance to express what she was never able to verbalize openly—her conflicts between defiance and submission, self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice, or more concretely, her conflict between the desire on the one hand for autonomous spinsterhood and on the other for acceptable marriage.”⁷¹ Glasser maintains that the spinsters in Wilkins Freeman’s work reflect this conflict; however, “Almost all her spinsters, though, defy in one way or another the concept of the unhappily isolated old maid. They have established new forms of self-definition through work, through relationships with other women, through their sense of unity with nature.”⁷² According to Mary R. Reichardt:

Freeman’s protagonists are frequently those most trapped by social or religious customs, by circumstance, or in constricting relationships—women, the elderly, the impoverished, the outcast. Of the sixty-nine stories written between 1882 and 1891, the majority involve women protagonists who must resort to some unexpected or even extreme behavior in order to preserve self-respect.⁷³

Glasser described Wilkins Freeman’s significance as:

In the range of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women writers, Freeman’s voice resonates as an odd mixture of traditions: sentimentalist, regionalist, subtle feminist, supernaturalist. In all of these categories, she was one of the most significant precursors of twentieth-

⁶⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁸ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, ed., *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper, 1920): xxv-xxvi, as cited in Kendrick, 3.

⁶⁹ Leah Blatt Glaser, “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930),” <http://faculty.gerorgetown.edu>.

⁷⁰ Annenberg Lerner, “Regional Realism,” <https://www.learner.org/series/amerpass/unit08/authors-4.html>.

⁷¹ Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden*, xvi-xvii.

⁷² Ibid, 61.

⁷³ Reichardt, ix-x.

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century psychological fiction about women. Set alongside New England writers of her time, Freeman provides a fascinating middle ground. She is neither an outspoken and committed feminist, the unambivalent “new woman” who began to emerge most visibly in the 1890’s, nor the passive promoter of the status quo so evident in women’s device books and journals of her time.

A glance of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Charlotte Perkins Gilman together, is a glance at the spectrum of women’s strategies and responses to social conditions at the turn of the century.⁷⁴

Mid-Century Resurgence

Mary R. Reichardt described how in the mid-twentieth century literary critics and feminists re-discovered Mary Wilkins Freeman’s work:

Interest in the works of Mary Wilkins Freeman has grown steadily since Edward Foster published what remains the standard biography, *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, in 1956.⁷⁵

Appreciation for Freeman’s writing has, in fact, increased steadily over the last decade. All but dismissed as a minor local-color realist throughout much of this century [20th], she is today considered, along with Sarah Orne Jewett, the foremost delineator of New England life at the turn of the century. More important, her work now occupies a significant position in the history of American women’s fiction in general and in the development of the American short story in particular. Witnessing to this positive reassessment, a number of important scholarly books on Freeman have appeared since 1985, including an edition of her letters, a literary biography, a collection of critical essays, and several full-length studies of her fiction. In addition, more than forty articles or book chapters and at least twenty Ph.D. dissertations dealing solely or in part with Freeman’s writings have been produced since that date.⁷⁶

In 1991, Mary Wilkins Freeman was honored for her literary contributions at a New Jersey Literary Heritage Celebration as well as related exhibits at Kean College and the Newark Public Library. The New Jersey General Assembly proclaimed November as Mary E. Wilkins Freeman Month in New Jersey, urging “the citizenry of this state to participate fittingly in the observation of the life and works of one of New Jersey’s most illustrious literary figures.” In 2003, Mary Wilkins Freeman’s house at 207 Lake Avenue was included in the New Jersey Women’s Heritage Trail and was included in the published booklet.

Conclusion

The house at 207 Lake Avenue is the best property to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion B for association with Mary Wilkins Freeman because it is the only extant house that she lived in during her prolific years as a well-respected and published author. The other

⁷⁴ Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden*, 214.

⁷⁵ Reichardt, ix.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, xviii.

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two homes where she lived and wrote, 361 S. Main Street in Randolph, MA and 159 Lake Avenue, Metuchen, were both subsequently destroyed.

Although Mary Wilkins Freeman's work was less well known by the time she passed away in 1930, she was valued and respected when she was at the prime of her writing. In addition, she is valued today as a prolific writer of short stories, as one of the most important members of the late-nineteenth-century New England school of women local colorists, and as a precursor to modern feminist literature due to her exploration of traditional female roles.

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Mary Wilkins Freeman House
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Geographic Data

Verbal Boundary Statement

The nominated property consists of the lot identified as Block 142, Lot 2, of the Borough of Metuchen tax map, in Middlesex County, New Jersey.

Boundary Justification Statement

The nominated property comprises the entire parcel that was occupied by the Freemans between 1901 and 1907.

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Section number Photographs Page 1

Property Name: Mary Wilkins Freeman House
Property Location: Borough of Metuchen, Middlesex County, New Jersey
Location of Negatives: ARCH², Inc.
495 Main Street, Suite 28
Metuchen, New Jersey 08840
Photographer: Deborah Kmetz
Date: April 01, 2019 (photos 09–25)
April 05, 2019 (photos 01–02; 05-07; 26-30; 32)
April 10, 2019 (photos 03; 04; 08; 31; 33)

Photograph No. 1 of 33: View looking west at the façade.
Photograph No. 2 of 33: View looking west at the rear yard.
Photograph No. 3 of 33: View looking west at the front door.
Photograph No. 4 of 33: View looking south at a window on the north elevation of the rear porch.
Photograph No. 5 of 33: View looking north at the south side elevation.
Photograph No. 6 of 33: View looking northeast at the south and west elevations.
Photograph No. 7 of 33: View looking east at the rear (west) elevation.
Photograph No. 8 of 33: View looking southeast at the rear (west elevation).
Photograph No. 9 of 33: View looking south at the north side elevation.
Photograph No. 10 of 33: View looking east at the entrance vestibule.
Photograph No. 11 of 33: View looking west from the vestibule to the central hallway and main staircase.
Photograph No. 12 of 33: View looking north at the small hallway at the rear of the main staircase.
Photograph No. 13 of 33: View looking east along the hallway towards the front entrance.
Photograph No. 14 of 33: View looking north at the bay window in the front parlor.
Photograph No. 15 of 33: Detail of the console bracket at the entrance to the bay window area.
Photograph No. 16 of 33: View looking west at the wall between the two parlors.
Photograph No. 17 of 33: View looking west at the fireplace in the front parlor.
Photograph No. 18 of 33: View looking south at the dining room.
Photograph No. 19 of 33: View looking at the medallion in the front parlor.
Photograph No. 20 of 33: View looking south at the door between the front parlor and the hallway.
Photograph No. 21 of 33: View looking southwest at the sitting room in the southeast corner of the house.
Photograph No. 22 of 33: View looking west at the paired doors between the sitting room and the porch.
Photograph No. 23 of 33: View looking west at the kitchen.
Photograph No. 24 of 33: View looking west at the back door.
Photograph No. 25 of 33: View looking north at the pantry and laundry room in the porch addition.
Photograph No. 26 of 33: View looking west at the second-floor hallway from the front of the house.
Photograph No. 27 of 33: View looking east at the paired windows on the façade.
Photograph No. 28 of 33: View looking north at the 2/2 window and inset panel.

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Section number Photographs Page 2

Photograph No. 29 of 33: View looking west at the bedroom in the northwest corner of the house.

Photograph No. 30 of 33: View looking south at the arched opening in the master bedroom.

Photograph No. 31 of 33: View looking north towards the hallway from the small room adjacent to the master bedroom.

Photograph No. 32 of 33: View looking east at the second-floor hallway.

Photograph No. 33 of 33: View looking southwest at doorways to the master bedroom suite (far left), the main bathroom (center), and the back staircase.

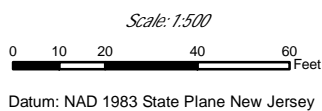
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Mary Wilkins Freeman House

New Jersey and National Registers Nomination
 Borough of Metuchen
 Middlesex County, New Jersey

Boundary and Tax Map



Legend

- SR and NR boundaries
- Tax Parcels
- Coordinates
- Photo location

0.51 Acres



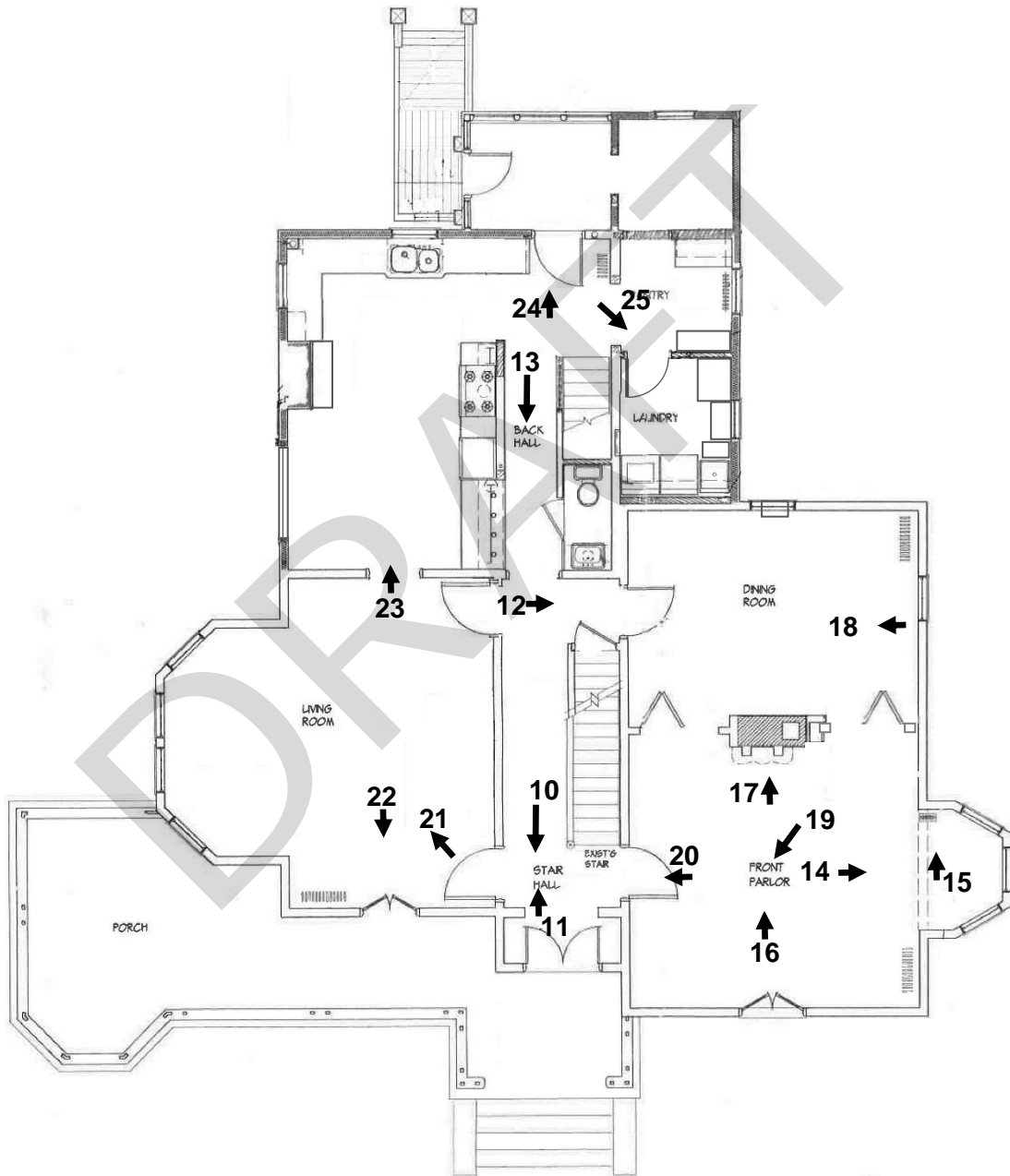
*NJDEP,
 Historic Preservation Office
 April 2019*

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

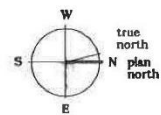
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Borough of Metuchen
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Section number Photo Key Page 2



FIRST FLOOR PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

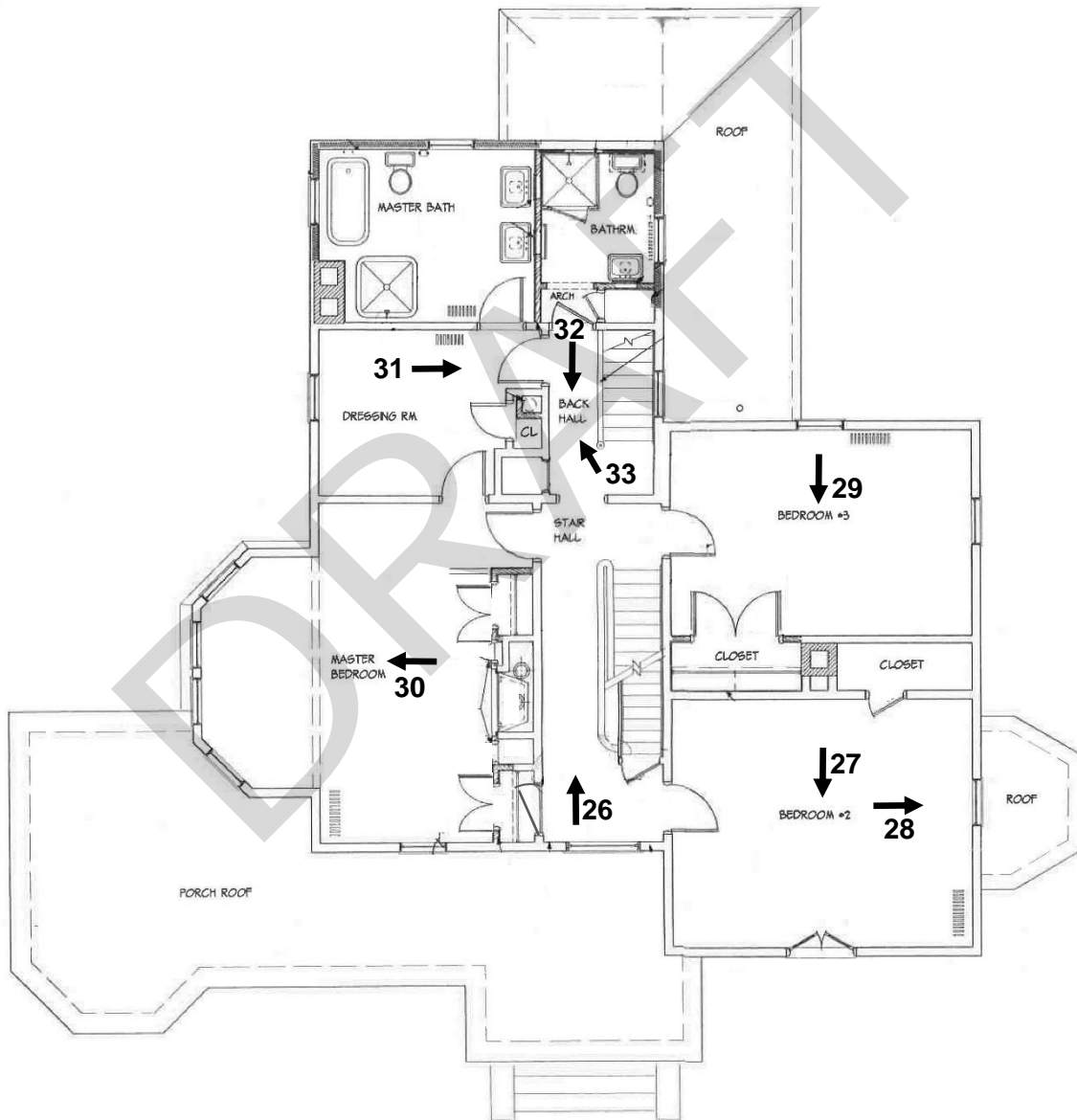


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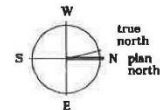
Mary Wilkins Freeman House
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SECOND FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: 1/8" = 1' - 0"



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Ca. 1905 postcard photograph of the Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County, New Jersey
Source: Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

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Mary Wilkins Freeman House
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Section number Historic Page 2
 Images



Ca. 1905 photograph of the Mary Wilkins
Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County,
New Jersey
Source: Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

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Mary Wilkins Freeman House
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Section number Historic Page 4
 Images _____



Early 1930s photograph of the Mary Wilkins
Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County,
New Jersey
Photographer: Lloyd Grimstead
Source: Metuchen-Edison Historical Society



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #01 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #02 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #03 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #04 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #05 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #06 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #07 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #08 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #09 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #10 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph 11 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #12 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #13 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #14 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #15 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #16 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #17 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #18 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #19 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #20 of 33.



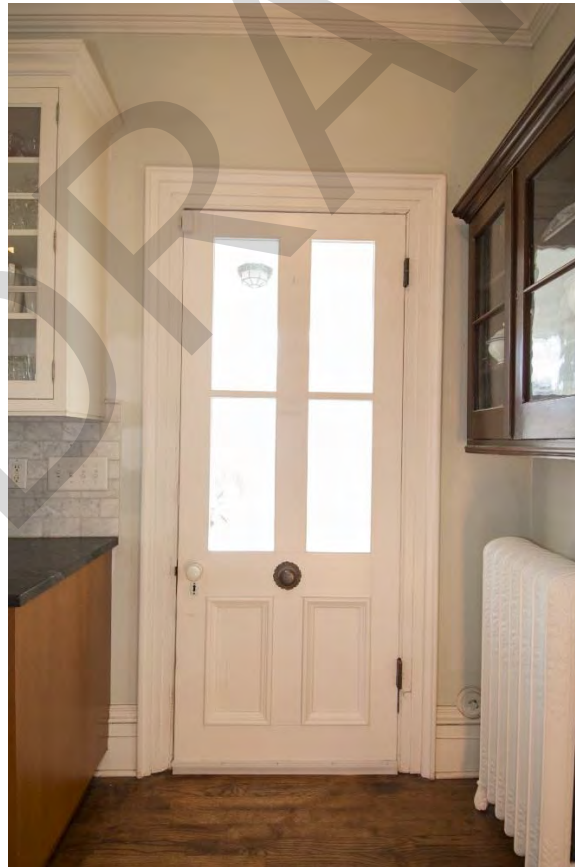
Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #21 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #22 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #23 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #24 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #25 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #26 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #27 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #28 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #29 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #30 of 33.



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Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #32 of 33.



Mary Wilkins Freeman House, Metuchen, Middlesex County. Photograph #33 of 33.