NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

RECEIVED
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NATIONAL REGISTER

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 *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Newcomb, John, House (preferred)
other names/site number Wellfleet Oysterman House

2. Location

street & number [redacted] [x] not for publication
city, town Wellfleet [x] vicinity
state MA code 025 county Barnstable code 001 zip code 02667

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
[x] private	[x] building(s)	1	1 buildings
[ ] public-local	[ ] district		sites
[ ] public-State	[ ] site		structures
[ ] public-Federal	[ ] structure		1 objects
	[ ] object	1	2 Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] 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 [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.

Valerie A Talmage — 7/28/88
Signature of certifying official — Date

Executive Director, Massachusetts Historical Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau — State Historic Preservation Officer

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official — Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

[x] entered in the National Register. — Beth L Savage — 9-15-88
[ ] See continuation sheet.
[ ] determined eligible for the National Register. [ ] See continuation sheet.
[ ] determined not eligible for the National Register.
[ ] removed from the National Register.
[ ] other, (explain:) _____

for Signature of the Keeper — Date of Action

6. Function or Use John Newcomb House, Wellfleet, Massachusetts

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)	Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)
Domestic: single dwelling	Domestic: single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification (enter categories from instructions)	Materials (enter categories from instructions)	
Early Republic: Federal	foundation	brick
	walls	wood: shingle
		wood: clapboard
	roof	wood: shingle
	other	

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The John Newcomb House (ca. 1829, MHC #T-309, Photo 1) is [redacted]

Scrub vegetation characterizes the area [redacted] is visible from the property to the southwest. Soils are thin sandy loam. The house is generally quite isolated due to its location, the thick field cover, and difficult vehicular passage over sandy paths leading [redacted] the ca. 1960 garage located approximately 200 feet northeast of the house. The garage does not contribute to the architectural or historical significance of the property.

The John Newcomb House is also known as the Wellfleet Oysterman House. Its owner was dubbed "The Wellfleet Oysterman" by American author Henry David Thoreau, who stayed overnight in the house during the course of his walking tour of the Cape in 1849. Thoreau's account of the visit and his description of the house and its surroundings comprise a chapter of his book, Cape Cod. Believed to have been constructed ca. 1829 by oyster fisherman and farmer John Newcomb, the small, compact house is one and one-half stories, with a double-pile plan, rectangular massing, and a southerly orientation. A one-story, one room ell is perpendicular to the north, or rear, elevation. Additions consist of a one-story studio northeast of and parallel to the house, which is accessible from the ell by way of a twelve-foot connector (Photo 2). Both studio and connector date to ca. 1970. All four elements of the present house--the original house, ell, connector, and studio--are wood-frame with gable roofs and shingle cladding.

[x] See continuation sheet

The house is a typical full cape, known historically as a "double house". Its five-bay facade--the long elevation parallel to the ridge pole--is composed of two pairs of windows that flank an entrance located slightly right of center (Photo 1). The house is of plank construction with brick underpinnings. Both walls and roof are covered with wood shingles, although a portion of the north wall (northwest corner) of the house is clapboarded. Cladding on the house and ell is painted white; the connector and studio are unpainted. On the east elevation, however, the shingle cladding has been painted only on the first floor (Photo 2).

Although the plan of the John Newcomb House was modified in the 1920s or 1930s, the original three-room plan of the first floor can still be distinguished. Two front rooms--the hall and parlor--are separated by a vestibule directly behind the main entrance. The old kitchen (now the livingroom) in the rear pile spans the width of the house. There are two small rooms at the east end of the former kitchen, and a break in the flooring suggests that two small rooms, possibly a pantry and additional bedroom, once existed at the west end as well. The three principle rooms are clustered around a single red brick chimney. An 1890s watercolor sketch of the house shows a shed-roofed summer kitchen on the north elevation. The present ell, believed to be the summer kitchen extended, now contains a modern kitchen. A single stair runs from the old kitchen in the rear pile to the garret. The garret is partitioned into three bedrooms and a bath. Intact original interior features include window and door trim, six-panel wooden doors with iron lift latches, sliding shutters in front room windows, chair rails in all first floor rooms, and random plank floors. The wooden beamed ceiling of the former kitchen is exposed.

The Cape Cod house of one and one-half stories, with a gable roof, interior chimney, and double-pile plan is the most common surviving house type in the region, popular for the entire 18th century and well into the 19th century. Capes with four-or five-bay facades appear to have been the most commonly constructed house forms in Wellfleet from the third quarter of the 18th century through the 1830s. A stylistic transition in evidence by the turn of the 19th century was the use of extended stud heights in conventional frame construction, which resulted in a widening of the distance between window head and cornice line on the long elevation. The John Newcomb House represents an older cape style, in which the window frames on the long elevation come directly under the box cornice (Photo 1). This choice of the earlier building technique, at a time when extended stud heights were employed locally, may be attributed to the age of the house's owner. John Newcomb was 66 years old when this house was built, and as a life-long resident of Wellfleet he undoubtedly built the type of house with which he was most familiar.

continued

Exterior ornament on the Newcomb House is concentrated at the central entry and cornice line of the facade. Pilasters flank the six-panel, painted wood door and fixed five-light transom. Ornamental molding appears beneath the boxed cornice across the facade. Similar molding is used for window heads, and dentils finish the molding over the door. On the east elevation (Photo 2), a gable-roofed enclosure with a vertical board door leads to a brick-lined round cellar in the northeast corner of the house.

All windows in the house contain double-hung wood sash, generally in a 6-over-6 or 2-over-2 configuration. The HABS report suggests that the 6-over-6 sash replaces the original 9-over-6 sash, extant at opposite corners on the north elevation (Myer, p.1). In each gable end of the house, fenestration of the garret includes three small 2-over-2 windows near the eaves and ridge pole that provide additional light and ventilation (Photos 2 and 4). A tripartite window in the garret on the west elevation (Photo 3) may have been created from two windows during the 1920s/1930s remodeling, at which time a screened porch was added on the first floor. Upper level windows display the same decorative moldings seen on the facade. Each window has vertical board shutters that are currently unmounted.

Twentieth-century additions to the Newcomb House are generally compatible with the original house and ell in size, scale, and materials. A one-story frame screened porch with a hipped roof of asphalt shingles (Photo 3) was added to the west side of the house in the 1920s or 1930s, and is accessible from the present living room by way of French doors. The connector and studio (ca. 1970) have wood-shingled gable roofs, box cornices, and unpainted shingle siding. The main (south) elevation of the studio is three bays wide with a center entrance. Windows contain double-hung 12-over-12 wood sash. An undated photograph of the Newcomb House that appeared in the 1914 edition of Cape Cod shows a shed east of the ell, in the location of the studio. Although the shed was detached from the house, its ridge pole, like that of the studio, was parallel to the ridge pole of the house. There is no indication, however, that the present studio incorporates the earlier shed.

A segment of a picket fence survives east of the house, extending south from the studio facade (Photo 2). The date of this fence in unknown; a 1940s photograph shows the fence passing also in front of the house. The John Newcomb House is used primarily as a summer residence but is outfitted with a central heating system. The house is very weathered but the property in general appears to be well-maintained. Vegetation immediately surrounding the house consists of shrubs and flower gardens.

continued

The John Newcomb House is building #19-64 of the Cape Cod National Seashore, a conservation area created in 1961 and administered by the National Park Service. The seashore park, which comprises more than 25,000 acres of public and private land [redacted]

Archaeological Description

While no prehistoric sites are currently recorded on the property, it is likely that sites are present. [redacted]. The physical characteristics of the propery, well [redacted] would have made this an attractive area for native settlement and subsistence activities. [redacted] an anadromous fish source. Given the size of the parcel (2.97 + acres) a moderate potential exists that sites are present.

There is a high potential for significant historical arachaeological remains on the property. Controlled testing and excavation can determine whether the remains of outbuildings (indicated in old photographs) exist on the property as well as occupation related features such as trash pits, privies,, and wells. Artifactual remains may also exist related to occupations (oyster fishery, farming, mariners) of the various inhabitants of the house.

8. Statement of Significance John Newcomb House, Wellfleet, Massachusetts

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

☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally

Applicable National Register Criteria ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D ☐ E ☐ F ☐ G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)	Period of Significance	Significant Dates
Architecture	1829–ca. 1850	1829
Literature		1849
Community Development		

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Significant Person
N/A

Architect/Builder
Newcomb, John Young

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The John Newcomb House, also known as the Wellfleet Oysterman House, Wellfleet, Massachusetts, is a well-preserved example of the Cape Cod double house, or full cape. [redacted] n [redacted]. First settled by farmers who later turned to maritime activities to supplement their income, the area diminished in significance by the mid-19th century due to the rapid growth of local maritime commerce and fishing industries, and the establishment of an institutional and commercial core of Wellfleet Harbor. The Newcomb House embodies distinctive characteristics of Cape Cod house construction, and the principle features of the house's design and construction during its period of significance are intact. John Newcomb and his house were the subjects of the journal essay "The Wellfleet Oysterman" written by Henry David Thoreau during his walking tour of Cape Cod in 1849. The secluded location and surrounding thick field cover have contributed to the preservation of the house in its relationship to the landscape. Retaining integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and association, the John Newcomb House fulfils Criteria A and C of the National Register of Historic Places and is important on the local level.

Wellfleet is a coastal resort community located on outer Cape Cod, midway between Chatham (at the "elbow" of the Cape) and Provincetown. The fishing, whaling, and oystering potential of the area attracted colonial settlement to the islands and tidal creek areas north and west of Wellfleet Harbor. Originally formed in 1722 as the Billingsgate Parish of Eastham, the land within the present town was established as the district of Wellfleet in 1763.

☒ See continuation sheet

The earliest meetinghouses were located near the harbor, at Chequessett Neck (1722) and later at Duck Creek further east (ca. 1735, enlarged 1765). Population grew steadily in the 18th century, and Wellfleet was incorporated as a town in 1775. Concentrated settlements in the western portion of town, especially on the islands (Bound Brook, Billingsgate, and Great) and along the harbor, were in evidence by the end of the century. Secondary settlements beyond these coastal areas consisted of dispersed farmsteads and occasionally a grist mill oriented along two north-south highways through Wellfleet, King's Highway and later the County Road.

The increased importance of Wellfleet's maritime economy toward the end of the 18th century corresponded with a decline in the usefulness of the town's land for farming. Soil fertility on the Cape in general suffered with intensified agricultural production and land clearing. After attempts to fertilize the land failed, the lack of adequate ground cover combined with the effects of wind and water caused severe erosion problems. By the end of the 18th century, shifting sands had left thousands of acres uncultivated. This region-wide phenomenon was particularly prevalent on the Outer Cape. By 1800, Wellfleet, with large tracts of land unfit for cultivation, was the most barren town on the Cape with the exception of Provincetown. These changes in the character of the landscape contributed to a change in the patterns of agricultural production on the Outer Cape by the end of the 18th century. In Wellfleet, home vegetable gardens and limited farms were in evidence, but the dearth of fertile land, particularly along the eastern shore, made large-scale farming prohibitive (MHC State Survey Team, pp. 228-232).

As early as the late 17th and early 18th centuries, however, farmers on the Cape supplemented their income by engaging in other pursuits, most commonly fishing and whaling. A substantial part of the local fishing industry was the harvest of shellfish, including oysters, clams, scallops, mussels, and lobsters. After a mysterious epidemic attacked the oyster crop in the late 18th century, the trade revived and became, with whaling, an important source of income for the town. Large scale replanting of oysters began early in the 19th century when forty schooners carried seed oysters from the Potomac River in Virginia to Wellfleet. The transplanting of seed oysters from Virginia took place annually after the epidemic. The Billingsgate oyster from the western shore of Wellfleet dominated the New England oyster business by the mid-19th century (MHC State Survey Team, p. 276). Markets for Wellfleet oysters included Boston, Portland, Newburyport, and Salem.

The John Newcomb House [redacted]

continued

[redacted]. The pond area is secluded in nature due to its location, the inaccessibility of its sandy roads, and the thick ground cover that has sprung up in the 20th century. King's Highway, now reduced to an overgrown path in some places, was the primary regional road through Cape Cod and the major north-south route from Eastham to Provincetown through the end of the 18th century. The importance of this highway as a major stage route through Wellfleet was later diminished with settlement along the County Road, which connected the village at Duck Creek on Wellfleet Harbor to the southwest with Truro. Gull Pond Road, the pond area's main access road and a secondary route to the Atlantic shore, was likely extended east from King's Highway by the mid-18th century. Gull Pond Road was not paved until the late 1930s.

Settlement of the pond area, particularly around Gull Pond, consisted of Cape Cod houses at the center of small subsistence farms with a few apple and pear trees, some outlying meager cornfields, and vegetable gardens near the houses. Some Wellfleet residents owned acreage in the vicinity of the ponds but lived elsewhere in town, cutting trees on their wooded lots for fuel for the winter months. The early settlement in the Gull Pond area included a tavern, a village store, and the earliest schoolhouse in Wellfleet. The importance of the settlement through the early 19th century is suggested by the location in 1816 of the town's first Methodist meetinghouse midway between the settlement at Duck Creek (present-day Wellfleet Center) and the Gull Pond area, and the construction of the first high school near Gull Pond. By the mid-19th century, however, centralization of Wellfleet's maritime industries a the harbor and increased use of the County Road prompted the flourishing of a large village at Duck Creek to the southwest. Consequently, the significance of the secluded and primarily agriculture-oriented Gull Pond settlement as a local entity was diminished.

John Young Newcomb (1762-1856) built his house [redacted] on a portion of land inherited from his father, William Newcomb, a farmer. The Newcomb family appears to have lived in the area at least since the early decades of the 18th century. John Newcomb's grandfather, Simon Newcomb, lived in nearby Truro and his land holdings straddled the Wellfleet-Truro boundary. John Newcomb, a life-long resident of Wellfleet, was in his sixties when his house was built, and he is believed to have lived on the family's farm--undoubtedly in a Cape Cod house-before building his new house ca. 1829. Destruction of Barnstable County deeds by fire in 1827 has hindered efforts to precisely date the Newcomb House. While a HABS report prepared in 1962 assigns a late 18th-century date, a Newcomb family genealogy records that the same John Newcomb, a resident of Wellfleet, built a house in 1829. Newcomb is not known to have been associated with any other house in Wellfleet.

continued

Newcomb's house is a fine example in a plain style of the Cape Cod double house, or full cape. The adaptation of the cape to the land is excellent. Built low to the ground, the small, compact house withstood the wind. Faced south, the house was heated by the sun. [redacted] also offered some protection from the extremes of cold. Arrangement of rooms was convenient and economical of space. The house has sustained alterations that impair the architectural value of the interior. Construction of a ca. 1970 studio and connector northeast of the main house, however, does not compromise the architectural integrity of the original house and ell.

The John Newcomb House was a mere twenty years old when the author Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and his companion, Ellery Channing, first saw it and spent the night there with Newcomb's family in the fall of 1849. Although the house was relatively new, Thoreau classified the building with the "old-fashioned and unpainted houses on the Cape [that] looked more comfortable, as well as picturesque, than the modern and more pretending ones, which were less in harmony with the scenery, and less firmly planted." (Thoreau, p. 82). Thoreau also noted that the Newcomb House and the two other houses visible [redacted]

Thoreau recounted his visit to the Newcomb House in Cape Cod, a collection of journal entries about three visits he made to the Cape in 1849, 1850, and 1855. The essays were brought together for the first time, edited, and published posthumously in 1865. Accounts of other Thoreau journeys were published in the same period, The Main Woods (1864) and A Yankee in Canada (1866). The author is best known for his essay Walden (1854), in which he imparted his ideas on how an individual should live life to the best advantage of his nature and principles (Salzman, p. 238). A disciple of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau embraced the principles of Transcendentalism, a literary and philosophical movement in New England in the early to mid-19th century. As a romantic naturalist, Thoreau sought to achieve a balance between mind and nature that is reflected in Cape Cod and other writings and representative of the transcendentalist search for reality through spiritual intuition. TheTranscendentalist aim was "to achieve vivid perception of the divine [spirit] as it operates in common life", an awareness seen as leading to personal cultivation (Salzman, p. 240).

continued

John Newcomb, a farmer and retired oysterman, was the subject of Thoreau's essay "The Wellfleet Oysterman". Thoreau was fascinated by his spry old host--Newcomb was then in his eighties--and the author's account of Newcomb, his property, and the surrounding landscape have immortalized the experiences common to many Wellfleet residents of Newcomb's generation. Thoreau described the land surrounding the Newcomb House as barren hills and valleys, indicating that erosion and shifting sands had taken their toll on the land. When the author inquired about the bareness of the place, Newcomb commented that they did nothing with the fields, but kept them fenced in an attempt to control the blowing sands (Thoreau, p. 88). Newcomb confined his agricultural pursuits to a small vegetable garden near his house in his later years. Thoreau noted that cabbage, broccoli, and parsley were among the plants in the garden of "about half an acre, which he cultivated wholly himself." (Thoreau, p. 101). A shed that once stood northeast of the house as late as the 1940s was most likely used in connection with the vegetable garden. Newcomb's house has no physical connection with oystering, as the activities of collecting, shucking, and shipping oysters would have been conducted down at the harbor.

Thoreau took great care in the "Wellfleet Oysterman" essay to describe the appearance of three Cape Cod houses--Newcomb's among them--that he encountered upon crossing Wellfleet's town boundary with Truro. He gave particular attention to the side elevations of the buildings:

> The [houses] were a story and a half high; but if you merely counted the windows in their gable-ends, you would think that there were many stories more, or, at any rate, that the half-story was the only one thought worthy of being illustrated. The great number of windows in the ends of the houses, and their irregularity in size and position, here and elsewhere on the Cape, struck us agreeably,--as if each of the various occupants...had punched a hole where his necessities required it, and according to his size and stature, without regard to outside effect. There were windows for the grown folks, and windows for the children,--three or four apiece...(Thoreau, pp. 81-82).

Thoreau's portrayal of these picturesque houses as exhibiting the personality of their inhabitants, and his obvious appreciation for their lack of pretentiousness, was very much in keeping not only with his own romantic sense of nature but with mood of his era.

continued

The John Newcomb House is currently used as a summer residence. The relatively isolated location, the large size of neighboring lots, and the thick field cover have contributed to the preservation of the house's relationship to the natural features of the landscape. Creation of the Cape Cod National Seashore by the National Park Service in the early 1960s has halted the development that once threatened [redacted]

Archaeological Significance

Since patterns of prehistoric occupation around interior Cape ponds and in this area of Wellfleet are poorly understood, any surviving sites would be significant. Sites in this area may represent a part of native settlement and subsistence systems which focus on bay/estuary areas like Wellfleet Harbor, employing such areas [redacted] locale for more specialized activities such as interior hunting and pond fishing. Sites in this area may also represent a different adaptation in the area separate from those on the bayside of town.

Historic archaeological remains described above have the potential for providing detailed information on the changing social, cultural, and economic patterns that characterized Wellfleet's development from its mixed maritime/agricultural beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries to the development of tourism in the 20th century. Archaeological survivals of those who inhabited the house offer the potential for a further examination of the mix between fishing and farming, possibly focusing on topics such as which was more important, the economic importance of crops versus fish and overall technologies used. Archaeological remains may also resolve exactly when the house was constructed.

9. Major Bibliographical References

John Newcomb House, Wellfleet, Massachusetts

[X] See continuation sheet

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 # MASS-704
- [ ] recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- [X] State historic preservation office
- [ ] Other State agency
- [ ] Federal agency
- [ ] Local government
- [ ] University
- [ ] Other

Specify repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 2.97 acres

UTM References

A [redacted] B [ ] [ ] [ ]
Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

C [ ] [ ] [ ] D [ ] [ ] [ ]

[X] See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

[X] See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

[X] See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kathleen A. Kelly, w/Mary s. Magenau, Wellfleet H.C. & Betsy Friedberg, Nat'l Reg. D
organization Massachusetts Historical Commission date May, 1988
street & number 80 Boylston Street telephone (617) 727-8470
city or town Boston state MA zip code 02116

9. Major Bibliographical References

Unpublished Sources

Myer, Donald B. Architectural Report for John Newcomb (Wellfleet Oysterman) House (Mass-704). Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service. August, 1962.

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Published Sources

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NPS Form 10-900-a
(8-86)

OMB Approval No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 88001457 Date Listed: 09/15/88

Newcomb, John, House — Property Name
Barnstable — County
MA — State

N/A — Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

84 Signature of the Keeper

9-15-88 — Date of Action

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Amended Items in Nomination:

Counts of contributing resources: should read

01 C buildings
01 C TOTAL

One contributing object was a typographical error.

The UTM point should have been entered on the form as [redacted]

This information was confirmed with Ann Tait, MASHPO, by telephone.

DISTRIBUTION:
National Register property file
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)