

The William Tyler Olcott House

—then and now

Recently AAVSO Treasurer Dave Hurdis made a pilgrimage to the site of the home of AAVSO founder and first Secretary, William Tyler Olcott. He came back with these pictures, and a short account of his trip. We have also included here a few photos and clippings from the AAVSO archives, showing the same residence as it was in the 1920s and 1930s.

As far as my search for the house goes, there was nothing to it. I just looked up 62 Church Street, Norwich, CT in “Mapquest” and drove right to it. I recognized it right away from the pictures that were shown at the Annual Meeting. The house is now broken up into four apartments, with parking spaces behind it (up the hill). A young (twenty-something) guy came out of the door after visiting a friend who lives there. I felt obliged to explain why I was photographing the house and mentioned the name “William Tyler Olcott.” He shrugged, looked at me strangely, and went on his way. The only other observation I would make about the site is that “back in the day” the house must have had a commanding view of Norwich Harbor, which is located at the confluence of the Yantic and Shetucket Rivers. They merge to form the Thames River, which flows about twelve miles, passing New London on its way to Long Island Sound. The view from the house is now mostly obstructed by newer buildings.

—Dave Hurdis



The Olcott residence, 62 Church Street, Norwich, Connecticut. The observatory dome is visible between the chimneys. Photo taken probably in 1921 when the dome was built. *From an article by Olcott in Popular Astronomy, January 1930.*



The Olcott residence, as it appears today. *Below: rear view of the house today, the observatory gone. Contemporary Photos by Dave Hurdis.*



Rear view, about 1921, showing the newly-built octagonal observatory which Olcott named “Starlight House.” *From Popular Astronomy, January 1930.*



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The Olcott Observatory—A Last Look

In March of 1958, the trustees of the Otis Library of Norwich, Connecticut asked me to assist them in planning a possible renovation of the top floor of the Olcott House to install a small planetarium and also to reactivate the observatory. The Olcott House, at this time, was a children's library owned by the Otis Library.

I corresponded with two planetarium manufacturers (Spitz and Zeiss) and Spitz had a unit suitable for a small space. Various telescope manufacturers were contacted for a 3" refractor similar to the one Olcott described in his books.

The Otis Library trustees decided against the planetarium and observatory plan and directed their funds to the purchase of a van to carry books to the elderly and handicapped who could not make it to the library.

I recollect my last look at the Olcott observatory as follows:

Upon entering the doorway into the observatory, one sees an octagonal configuration which measures 10 feet across the flats of the octagon. The dome was made of [painted canvas] and had several rollers on which the dome rotated. A single wooden handle was fastened to the dome structure and the dome was rotated by pushing the handle. On each wall panel of the octagon were numerous watercolor paintings of various astronomical objects. The telescope pier was a very massive 8" diameter steel pipe and had a rising pier feature. The pier could be cranked from a height of 56" to 94" to permit placement of the telescope eyepiece to a convenient height.

Robert Tumicki
Norwich, Conn.
Feb. 28, 1982

(from the AAVSO Archives, W. S. Houston Collection)



Olcott in his octagonal observatory in 1927. AAVSO Archives.

Right: Clara Hyde Olcott (wife of W.T.O.), Annie Jump Cannon of Harvard College Observatory, W.T.O., and Edwin F. Carpenter of Steward Observatory, Univ. of Arizona. About 1933. AAVSO Archives, Olcott Collection.



Below: A 1954 newspaper clipping reporting transfer of ownership of the Olcott house from Christ Church to the Otis Library of Norwich. AAVSO Archives, Houston Collection

OTIS LIBRARY BUYS OLCOTT RESIDENCE; WILL BE USED AS CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT

FEB 26 1954

The stage was set Thursday for a new children's library when title to the Olcott residence at 62 Church street was conveyed to the Otis library by Christ church parish. The sale price was not divulged.

Attorneys Henry H. Pettis and Charles V. James acted for the library in their capacity as trustees and Attorney Richard L. Norman represented the church. The deed was later recorded at the office of Town Clerk J. Dyer Potter.

Necessary alterations and improvements will be made to the 2½ frame structure and it will be opened up as a branch of the Otis library for use by children in the community, as soon as possible. It will be staffed by a librarian and supplied exclusively with children's books and other literature. Since there are a number of large rooms in the building, it is hoped that a portion of the place may be made available at a later date for meeting purposes.

Since the building is within reach of the Otis library it should prove an ideal location for the contemplated addition. Once the children's department is established

there the arrangement will relieve the presently crowded conditions in the Otis library.

The Olcott residence was built 200 years ago by Rev. John Tyler, first rector of Christ Episcopal church. It remained in the family down through the years and was the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Tyler Olcott for a long time. Under the will of Mr. Olcott his wife had the life use of it and following her death it reverted to Christ church. It was the intent of Mr. Olcott that the property be used possibly as a rectory or parish house, but the church purchased a new rectory a few years ago and the need of a parish house was not deemed expedient since all church activities are centered at the edifice on Washington street.

The church was later authorized to sell the place and arrangements were made to convey it to the library. The house has six rooms on each of two floors and is located on a lot that has 52 feet frontage on Church street. The lot has a depth of 132 feet, rising in terraces at 25 degree grade to School street in the rear. Bordering it is a 15 foot lane which is seldom used.



Rear view, about 1921, showing the dome; W.T.O. in the window. AAVSO Archives.



Rear view of of the Olcott House as it looks today.