

Historic Narrative Report

Wertheim Cabin

Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Hamlet of Shirley, Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County



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Introduction

This report documents the ca. 1940 Wertheim Cabin, also known as the “Old Headquarters” of the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, and originally known as “Stealaway” by the Wertheim family. Through the consultation process with the N.Y. SHPO (SHPO), it has been determined that the “Cabin” is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion B.

The Cabin is slated for demolition by the owner, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). This undertaking was proposed for several reasons. The building served as the refuge’s administrative office and visitor center until 2010. After many years of use, the building was determined to be severely undersized and in an inappropriate location considering its uses and accessibility. In 2010, a 13,000 square foot headquarters and visitor center was constructed in another location at the refuge. It houses administrative offices, visitor information services, meeting rooms, and spaces for “Friends of the Refuge” groups. Because of this, the Cabin has been vacant since 2012, no longer serves a purpose to the refuge, and has been an attractive nuisance with the liability issues associated with a vacant building. The USFWS does not have the staffing or funding resources to repair and maintain the building for its own use, ensure that vandalism will be prevented, or to manage a lease to another entity. In addition, the undertaking will help the USFWS fulfill the mission of wildlife and habitat protection. The removal of the Cabin – as well as its septic system and above-ground utilities – will help reduce human disturbance to the adjacent refuge lands, which are home to wildlife habitat.

The determination of effect follows the Section 106 regulation 36 CFR § 800.5 of the National Historic Preservation Act, which addresses the assessment of adverse effects to historic properties. The demolition of the Cabin will clearly be an adverse effect, as the undertaking will involve the “physical destruction of or damage to all or part of the property” as defined by 800.5 (a)(2)(i). A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was executed between the SHPO and USFWS; one stipulation of the MOA is the production of this historic narrative report for the Cabin. As specified in the MOA, this report includes inserted digital photographs that have also been submitted to the SHPO as individual digital TIFF files. The report and photographs were produced by Paula Sagerman, Historic Preservation Consultant to the USFWS.

Description

The Wertheim Cabin sits on the west bank of the Carmans River, which bisects the Refuge, and is accessed via Wertheim Maintenance Entrance Road (also known as the Old Entrance Road), a driveway that begins at Smith Road in the town of Shirley and ends just south of the Cabin. The Cabin is part of a group of structures associated with the Refuge, including a small house, quarters duplex, and maintenance buildings. There are scattered mature deciduous trees and areas of lawn around the Cabin, and a gravel parking area to the north.

The one-story wood-framed Cabin faces east toward the river. It has an irregular footprint that consists of a main block with a rectangular footprint oriented north-south, a north-south wing to the north, and an east-west wing to the west. The building has a cement block foundation, wood shake siding, and cross-gabled, open-eave, overhanging, low-sloped asphalt-shingle roofs. There

are sections of vertical wood siding at the south and east elevations of the main block, where a recessed porch was infilled to create interior office space.

The building has three large brick chimneys; one is a center ridge chimney at the main block, and there are exterior ridge chimneys at the gable walls of the wings. At the southwest corner of the main block, there is a small recessed open entry porch supported by a square post, which leads to a modern deck at the south end of the building. The deck is accessed via a modern wooden boardwalk that leads around the rear of the Cabin from the parking area. There are also small storage projections at the southwest corner of the main block, right end of the west elevation of the north wing, and flanking the north chimney.

The entry porch leads to a modern hollow-core door within the infilled siding, and there is a rear hollow-core door at the left end of the west elevation of the north wing. One-over-one wood windows were installed within the vertical siding, and some of these windows are blocked up with plywood. The rest of the building has a mix of one-over-one wood windows, one-over-one vinyl windows, small paired casements, and small four-pane wood horizontal windows, and there is a picture window at the east elevation that has also been blocked up with plywood. The interior of the building consists of office and meeting spaces, with one large room in the main block and hallways leading to smaller rooms in the wings. The building is mostly carpeted, and there is some linoleum and wood flooring. The walls are mostly covered with false wood paneling, and there is one room with cedar paneling, and others with wallpaper. There are acoustical tile ceilings throughout. Each building section has a fireplace; the main block has a large projecting brick fireplace, the west wing has a small brick fireplace, and the north wing has a full-height flush fireplace with a wood mantel. The fireplaces of the main block and north wing have modern metal inserts with glass doors.

Construction Chronology

According to Burt Seides, a local resident who visited the Cabin as early as the 1940s, the building dates to 1940 or possibly as early as the 1920s, and the original structure was an inverted barge-type ship hull set on timbers. Wertheim acquired the property in 1938, so it is likely that if the main block had not already been built around the hull, he built the main block shortly thereafter. There are historic photographs of Wertheim and visitors that were reportedly taken near the cabin in 1940 or earlier, one showing the cabin in the distance. A 1975 USFWS survey of buildings in this location notes a construction date of 1940 for the Cabin. The wings were likely added during the 1940s, prior to Wertheim's death in 1950. Refuge staff do not believe that the building was altered between 1950 and the 1970s.

A 1975 sketch plan of the Cabin (see page 30) shows that the main block was one room, as it is today, and served as the living room. The north wing had a bedroom, bathroom, and the extant cedar closet. The west wing had a bedroom, kitchen (where the main entryway was located), and bathroom. A 1975 sketch plan of the Stealaway complex (see page 30) shows nearby buildings such as a pole barn with horse stalls, a garage, a bird holding pen, and a small house. These outbuildings were constructed during or prior to the Wertheims' occupation, and the small house was occupied by another family.

Annual Refuge reports from the 1970s and later note alterations to the Cabin and nearby buildings. Minor interior modifications were made in 1975 to convert the building from a residential building to offices, and a recessed porch with jalousie windows over half walls, at the southeast corner of the main block, was glazed with ribbons of storm windows. The roof was replaced in 1981. There was a comprehensive renovation in 1987. At the exterior, the vertical infill siding was added at the porch openings (and still provides evidence of the location of the porch), and the exterior doors were installed. Interior modifications included the removal of the remains of the boat structure and structural upgrades, modifications to the interior floor plan, and installation of new finishes such as carpeting, wood flooring, suspended tile ceilings, and fireplace inserts.

All of the outbuildings associated with the Wertheims have been removed by the USFWS, and there are new buildings near the Cabin, including two residential buildings to the south and maintenance buildings to the west. None of these buildings encroach on the Cabin and its immediate setting.

Statement of Significance

Historical Background and Context

The Wertheim Cabin and its 1,788 acre property was a vacation retreat for Maurice Wertheim and his family from 1938 to 1974. Wertheim was a wealthy businessman, philanthropist, sportsman, and art collector from New York City who used the Cabin and property – which he named Stealaway – from 1938 until his death in 1950 for his favorite pastime, duck hunting. After his death, his wife Cecile and family visited the Cabin until her death in 1974. In 1947, the Wertheims bequeathed the Cabin and 1,788 acres to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the purpose of land and wildlife conservation, retaining life estates. In 1974, the land became the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, and the Cabin was used as the refuge headquarters building until 2012.

The life of Maurice Wertheim (1886-1950) is well-documented in contemporaneous newspaper articles, his autobiographical entries in college reunion reports, and his obituary. He graduated from Harvard University and then worked for his father's United Cigar Manufacturing Company, first as Secretary, and then as Vice-President. He and wife Alma lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and in 1912, when Maurice was twenty-six years of age, they purchased Wyndygoul, a country estate with a manor house in Cos Cob, Connecticut, which was used as a weekend retreat.

In 1913, Wertheim was appointed to the New York State Industrial Board, where he was in charge of all factory legislation in the state, and assisted with the establishment of a new labor law. In 1914, he resigned that position to become the assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, who was his wife's father. It was at this point that he became involved in activism, bringing a "relief fund" to Syria and Palestine aboard a military ship. His lengthy banking career began on Wall Street in 1915, and in 1916, he joined the firm of Hallgarten & Company. In 1927, he established the investment banking firm of Wertheim & Co., and remained an

investment banker until his death. He was also a trustee of the news magazine, *The Nation*, and was owner and publisher from 1935-1937.

The 1925 New York census shows that Wertheim and his family, including three daughters, had moved from an apartment building into a townhouse on the Upper East Side, and had five servants. The Wertheims divorced in 1929, and Maurice retained ownership of Wyndygoul. Maurice remarried shortly thereafter, and was divorced again in 1935. He married his third wife, Cecile, in 1944, and they first lived in a penthouse on the Upper East Side, and then in 1948 purchased a large townhouse nearby.

Wertheim was an important Jewish activist during the 1930s and 1940s. He participated in the organization and funding of several agencies, including those involved in the creation of the State of Israel. In 1938, Wertheim was named co-chairman of Greater New York Campaign of the United Palestine Appeal, which was created in response to anti-Semitic activities in Europe. He was also a trustee of the New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies. In 1939, he became chairman of the American Jewish Committee, and from 1941-1943, he was its president.

According to *Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945-2006*, on June 7, 1942, Zionist and American Jewish Committee leaders – including future Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion – met at Wertheim’s Cos Cob house, and discussed the terms of the “Cos Cob Formula,” a Zionist program for a Jewish state. This book and newspaper articles depict the Cos Cob Formula as a major controversial issue that caused a rift between Zionists and the American Jewish Committee, and influenced the negotiations leading up the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

In 1943, the American Jewish Committee proposed a United Nations peace treaty that would offer a resettlement program to oppressed people who were forced to emigrate from “war-devastated” countries. At this point in the movement towards the creation of Israel, Palestine was not regarded by the committee as the only possible location for this resettlement. The two objectives of the proposal included the salvation to those who were persecuted during the war, and the “preservation of the Jewish community as a spiritual force.” A policy of “friendship and cooperation” between Jews and Arabs in Palestine was endorsed. Later in the year, the committee split over whether or not Palestine should be the only resettlement place, and of course, ultimately this became the final decision.

In 1945, Wertheim was elected chairman of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, which had begun a fundraising campaign dedicated to the health and welfare needs of New York City children, with the donations to fund hospitals and social service agencies. In 1949, after the creation of Israel, Wertheim became co-chairman of the board of the Industrial Institute of Israel, which aided Israel in attracting investment and industrial expertise. Additional World War II activism included serving on the U.S. War Department’s War Production Board, and as an avid chess player, managing a radio chess match played between American and Soviet teams for the benefit of “Russian War Relief.”

Wertheim was also an active supporter of New York's cultural life and is known for his large collection of masterpieces by artists such as Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Edouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. He bequeathed the collection to Harvard University's Fogg Museum of Art. There is also a published book about the collection, *Degas to Matisse: The Maurice Wertheim Collection*. He was also a founder and director of the New York Theatre Guild, a patron of exhibitions sponsored by the Sculptors Guild, and served on the advisory committee of the New York University Institute of Fine Arts. There is also a room dedicated to Wertheim in the main branch of the New York Public Library, the Wertheim Study Room.

Despite his devotion to political and cultural activities, Wertheim's self-proclaimed main personal interests were duck hunting and wildlife conservation, and he was a trustee of the American Wildlife Foundation. Deeds show that in 1938 – in between his second and third marriages – Wertheim purchased much of the lands that would become his donation to the federal government, including the parcel with the Cabin, which he named Stealaway. He acquired additional parcels between 1939 and 1944, which grew his land holdings to 1,788 acres, comprised of thirty-eight separate tracts that straddled the Carmans River, including the land under the river. This area of Long Island had remained rural into the early twentieth century, with scattered duck farms and salt hay meadows. Wertheim's land on the east side of the river, was a section of the "Tangier Tract," a 10,000 acre property that was the location of a failed tourist development.

According to letters sent in 1941 amongst USFWS personnel, Wertheim considered donating the property as early as this year. The correspondence notes that the lands were held by Wertheim under the former names of the Carmans River Corporation and the Indian Landing Corporation (parcels amassed by previous owners, other wealthy New York industrialists), and were bounded north by the Montauk Highway and included about 500 acres of marshland, meadow lands and woodlands that supported habitat for "pheasant, quail, woodcock, rabbit and deer." The only structures on the land at the time were a "hunting and outing camp...erected on the west bank of the river." This likely refers to the Cabin and its outbuildings.

According to an interview with Wertheim described an article in the August 14, 1948, issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, Wertheim made the final decision to donate his property to the United States in 1943, when USFWS Director Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson was a guest of Wertheim's at the Cabin. Gabrielson told him "he'd seen fifty-three varieties of birds during a before-breakfast walk and then gave him an expectant federal stare." The details of the bequest were agreed upon that year, but because of legal and tax issues with the State of New York, the actual transaction between Wertheim and the United States did not occur for a few more years.

In June 1947, Maurice and Cecile Wertheim granted to the United States an estate in the property that would become the possession of the U.S. upon the death of the survivor of the Wertheims. The purpose of the bequest was to establish a sanctuary for migratory birds under the provision of the 1929 "Migratory Bird Conservation Act," in recognition of the Carmans River serving as a natural fly-way and resting ground for migratory birds and as a breeding ground for native waterfowl. Upon the deaths of the Wertheims, the sanctuary was to become the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, and the Wertheims had reserved the right to use the lands and the

Cabin for hunting and fishing during their lifetimes. The agreement included stipulations that the Wertheims would maintain a log of hunting activities including the number of and species of birds taken, there would be a limit of fifty bird bags per week during hunting seasons, and the Wertheims were to maintain or improve natural features and habitats such as ponds and breeding grounds. Wertheim was interviewed for the August 14, 1948, "Talk of the Town" column in *The New Yorker* magazine, where he discussed the creation of the national wildlife refuge.

The Cabin was first used as the Refuge headquarters in 1975, but according to Refuge annual reports, the Refuge remained closed to the public until 1982, when educational visits for school groups began. Also that year, the Refuge became the headquarters refuge of the Long Island Complex, with the Cabin serving as the headquarters building. The Refuge opened to the public in 1986. A new headquarters building was constructed across the Carmans River in 2012, and the Cabin has been vacant since then.

Significance

The Cabin is significant under Criterion B of the National Register of Historic Places for its association with Maurice Wertheim. It represents his important contributions to the federal government and land and wildlife conservation, his favorite pastime, hunting, and his interest in wildlife habitat conservation. In fact, although his obituary provides a long list of his professional and activist achievements, it notes that he "preferred to be considered a sportsman."

The 1,788 acres of Wertheim tracts became the first national wildlife refuge on Long Island and the Refuge is now one of nine refuges of the Long Island Complex. The Wertheim refuge includes the largest contiguous wetland on Long Island, and the Wertheim tracts comprise 28% of the current refuge lands on Long Island. Long Island's strategic location along the "Atlantic Flyway" provides important habitat for hundreds of species of migratory birds. The now 2,550-acre Wertheim Refuge includes the state-designated "scenic" ten mile long Carmans River, and habitats including woodlands, grasslands, and waterways that support migratory birds, deer, osprey, muskrat, fox, turtles and frogs. The refuge also protects the Carmans River estuary of the Great South Bay, which is visited by migratory waterfowl. The 1947 donation also helped protect this area of Long Island from the suburban and tourism development that intensified after World War II.

It should also be noted that Cecile Wertheim is also an important figure related to the Cabin, as she was married to Maurice by the time the land was bequeathed, shared ownership of the land with him, and continued to use the Cabin and property with Maurice's children and grandchildren.

The New York City residences of Wertheim could also be considered surviving historic resources associated with him, and they are all within the Upper East Side Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Two of these residences were within multi-unit apartment buildings, so could not be considered for Criterion B, but two are intact historic townhouses. One is 164 E. 63rd Street, where he lived in the 1920s, and the other is 43 E. 70th Street, which he and Cecile acquired in 1948, two years before his death and where she lived until her death in 1974. The Cos Cob residence has been demolished. While the

Manhattan residences may represent Wertheim's contributions to the banking industry, Jewish activism, and cultural institutions, the Cabin best represents his contribution to land and wildlife conservation and the establishment of Long Island's first national wildlife refuge.

Although altered, and not considered eligible for Criterion C of the National Register, the Cabin retains enough integrity to depict its design and occupation by Maurice Wertheim. While the outbuildings have been removed, they are not necessary to depict the significance of the Cabin. The newer nearby structures somewhat detract from the historic setting, but the rural, wooded, riverfront are around the Cabin remains intact.

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Photographic Index

Photographs were taken by Paula Sagerman April 9, 2021.

They are also available as TIFF digital files.

See page 13 for exterior photo key and 31 for interior photo key.

1. Facing north toward Cabin with Carmans River to the right.
2. Facing northeast toward Cabin from service road.
3. Facing east toward Cabin across service road.
4. Facing southeast toward Cabin across service road.
5. Facing north toward Cabin.
6. Facing north toward main block and front (south) elevation.
7. Facing northeast toward west wing and main block.
8. Facing northeast toward front (south) elevation.
9. Facing northwest toward east elevation of main block and north wing.
10. Facing southwest toward main block and north wing.
11. Facing east toward west wing and main block.
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13. Facing south toward north wing.
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16. Facing south toward north wing, main block, and west wing.
17. Facing north in main block.
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22. Facing northeast in west room of main block.
23. Facing east from west room of west wing into main block.
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25. Facing southwest in west room of west wing.
26. Facing southwest in north room of north wing.
27. Facing north in north room of north wing.
28. Facing south from north room of north wing into main block.

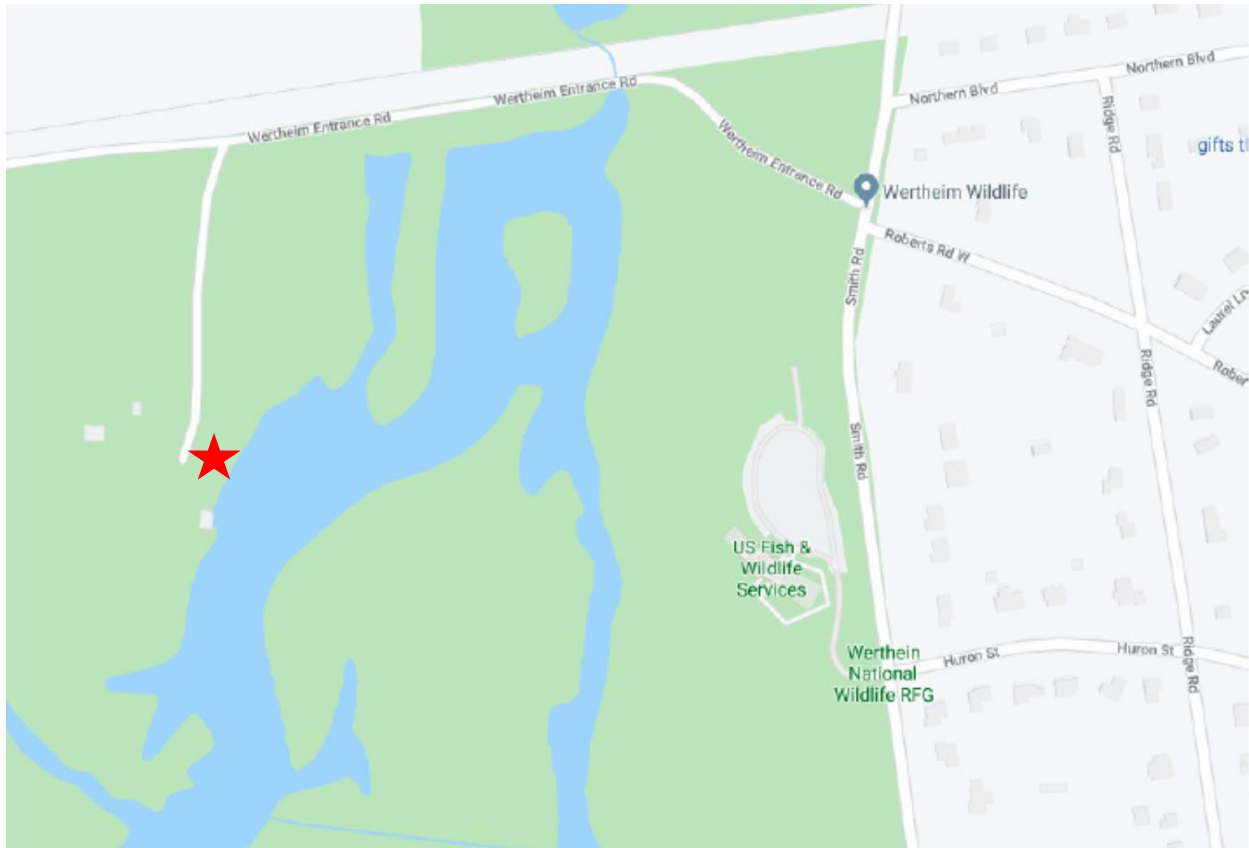
Maps



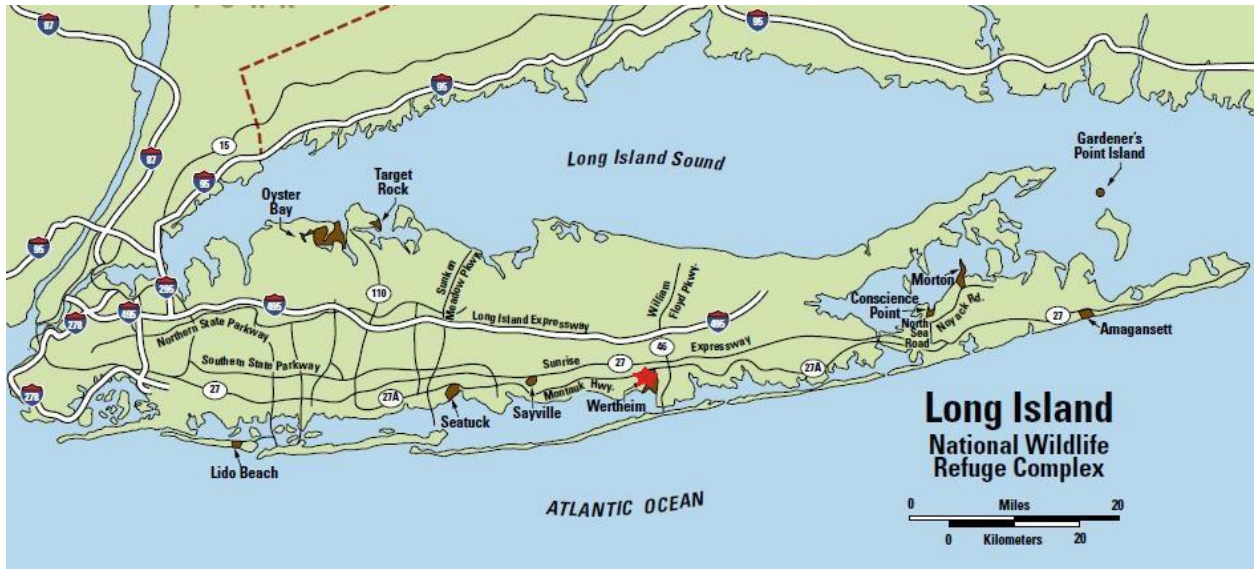
USGS Bellport, NY, Topographical Map, 1967
Red arrow points to location of Wertheim Cabin



USGS Bellport, NY, Topographical Map, 2019
Red arrow points to location of Wertheim Cabin



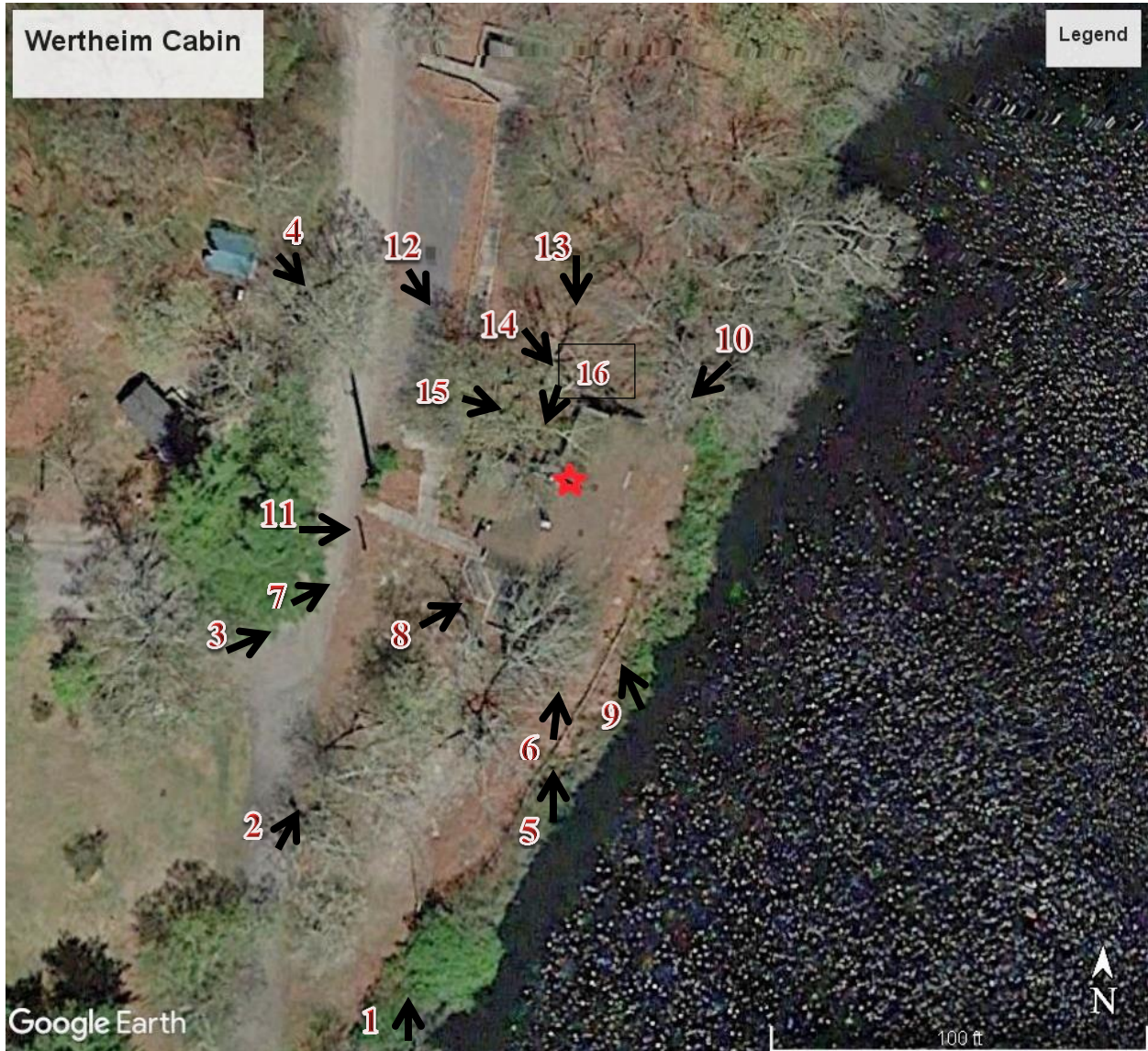
Google Street Map
Red star shows location of Cabin



USFWS Map of Long Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Red star shows general location of Cabin



USFWS Map of Wertheim Refuge
Red star shows general location of Cabin



Google Earth Aerial Image and Photo Key
Red star shows location of Cabin

Existing Conditions Photographs



1. Facing north toward Cabin with Carmans River to the right.



2. Facing northeast toward Cabin from service road.



3. Facing east toward Cabin across service road.



4. Facing southeast toward Cabin across service road.



5. Facing north toward Cabin.



6. Facing north toward main block and front (south) elevation.



7. Facing northeast toward west wing and main block.



8. Facing northeast toward south elevation of main block.
Full-height green siding installed in 1987 over location of original front door.



9. Facing northwest toward south and east elevations.
Green siding installed in 1987 marks location of original recessed porch with jalousie windows.



10. Facing southwest toward main block and north wing.



11. Facing east toward west wing and main block.



12. Facing southeast toward north wing and west wing.



13. Facing south toward north wing.



14. Facing southeast toward north wing.



15. Facing east toward north wing.



16. Facing south toward north wing, main block, and west wing.



17. Facing north in main block.



18. Facing south in main block.



19. Facing west in main block.



20. Facing south in west room of main block.



21. Facing southwest in west room of main block.



22. Facing northeast in west room of main block.



23. Facing east from west room of west wing into main block.



24. Facing northeast in west room of west wing.



25. Facing southwest in west room of west wing.



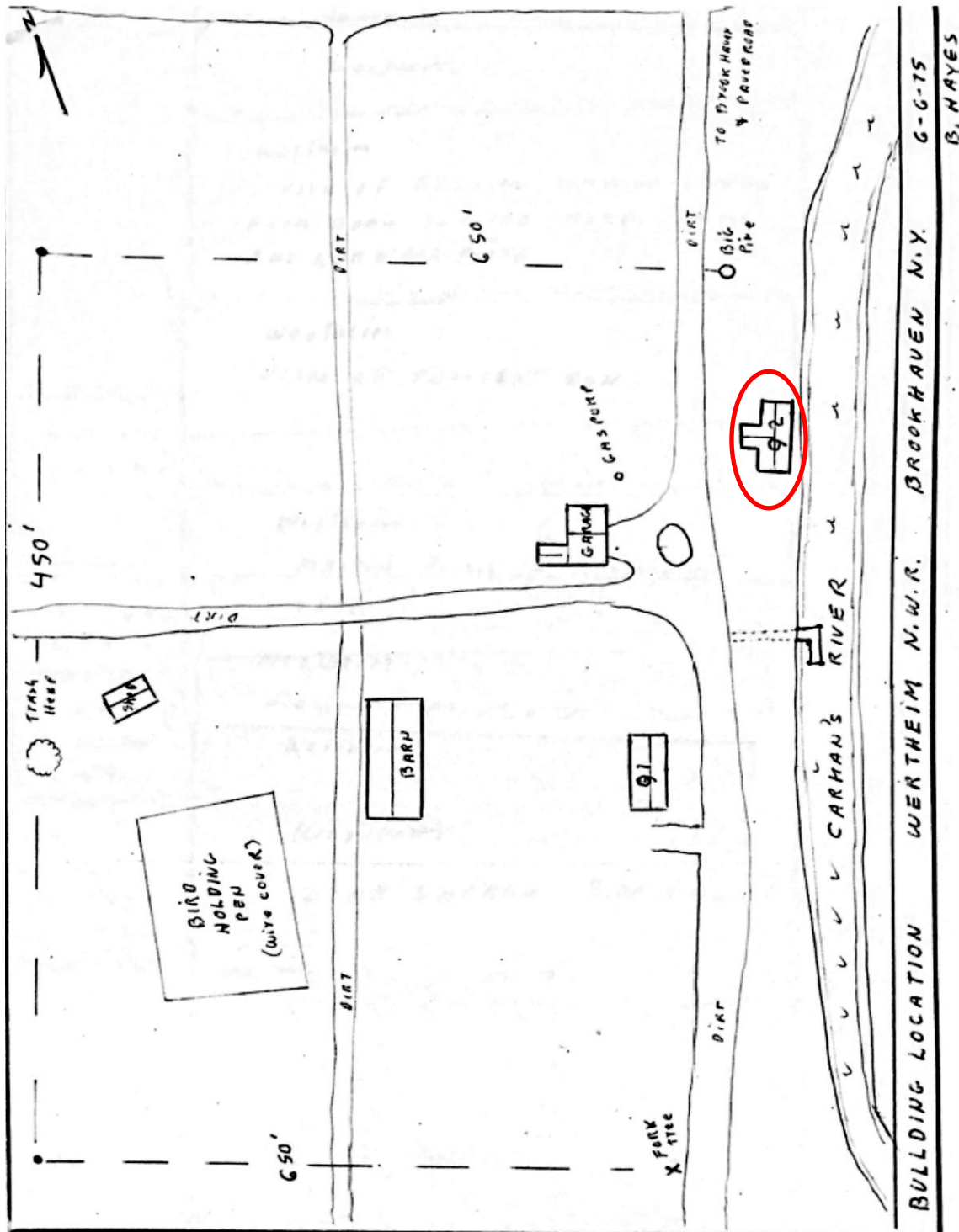
26. Facing southwest in north room of north wing.



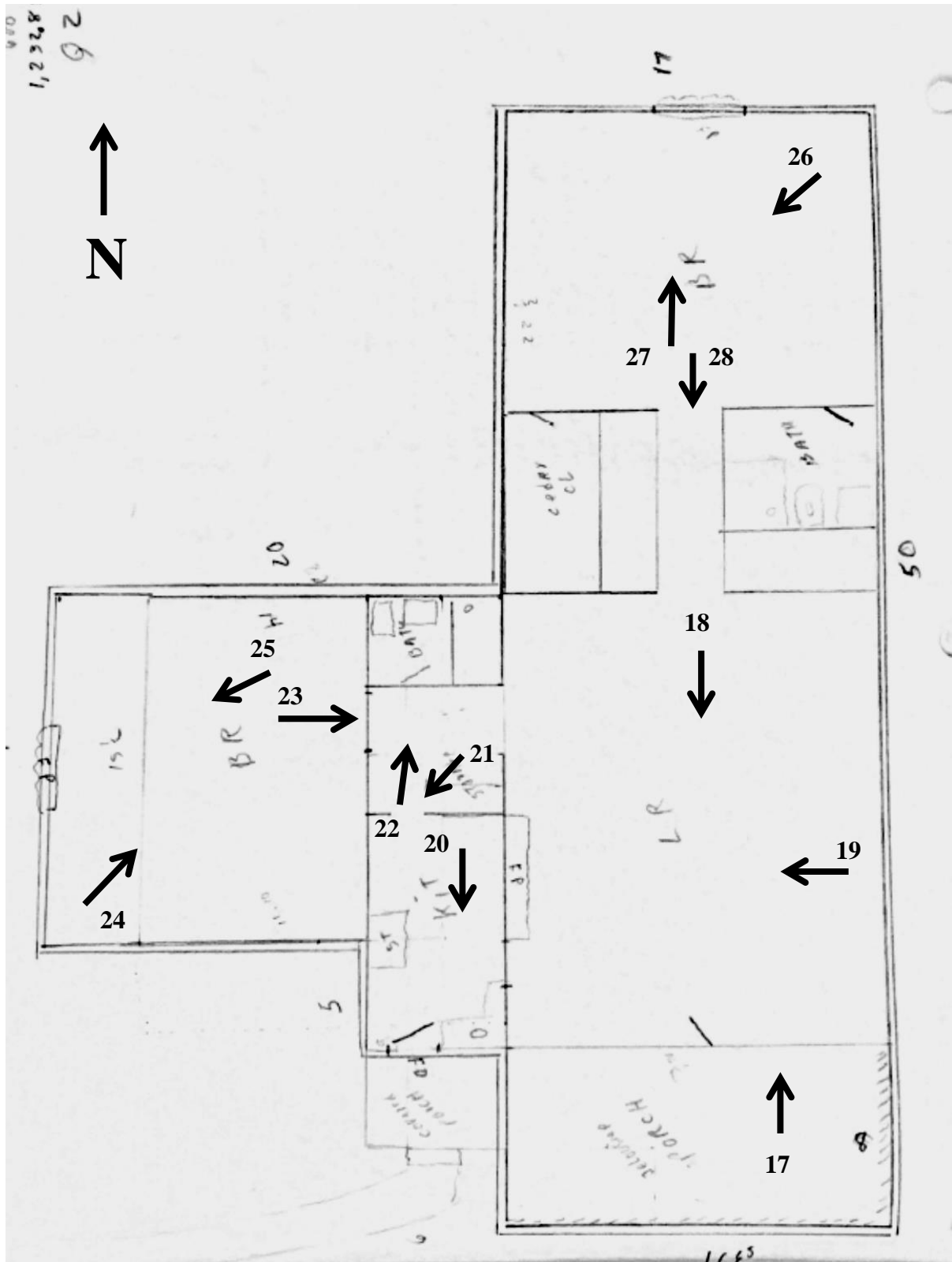
27. Facing north in north room of north wing.



28. Facing south from north room of north wing into main block.



1975 map by B. Hayes of Stealaway complex. Wertheim Cabin is circled in red. None of the other structures remain.



1975 Floor Plan of Cabin



Ca. late 1930s photo, taken at Stealaway dock, Maurice Wertheim in center.

From “Brookhaven/South Haven Hamlets & Their People” website,

<http://brookhavensouthhaven.org/hamletpeople/tng/showmedia.php?mediaID=1159&medialinkID=1630>