This paper will describe the house that I lived in from February 1978 until May 1981. I hope that through the story of the house and its households much about life in Middletown will be revealed. The information in the paper is a combination, coming from research papers and other secondary sources, city directories, probate records, interviews, and my own experiences.

After having graduated from Wesleyan University in 1977 and having spent six months travelling in the western United States, I returned to Middletown. Having no source of income at that time, I looked for a cheap place to live. A friend who was working in Middlet as a musician told me and another Wesleyan graduate, a homeless musician named Mark Powell, about a cheap, two-bedroom apartment (about $160/month including heat) on Ferry St. A lot of Wesleyan people put down Ferry St and think that it's a slum or something, but I always liked it; there's a lot of street life, people are always outside. So, Mark and I decided to take a look.

I wasn't able to go with Mark when he went to look at the apartment. As Sal, the sixty year old owner of the building who lived in the back apartment was showing Mark around, he asked Mark what my name was. When Mark said, "Dan, Dan Perlstein," Sal replied, "Perlstein, huh, He's not Black is he?" Mark said that I wasn't and we moved in.

We pulled up into the driveway, next to the "NO Tresspassing" sign and began to unload stuff through the kitchen door. The only hint about the identity of the prior tenants was a Sept/Oct 1977
calander advertising the Tung Ming Lung Co., Importers of Boston. It had a pretty Chinese landscape photograph and hung on the kitchen wall. The Lung Co imported Chinese foods for restaurants. It turns out that the couple worked at Debbie Wong restaurant and moved out when they could afford to. They seemed to be the only Asian Chinese people on the street, perhaps the first since Charlie Wing who ran a laundry around 1927.

Two other things of interest about the kitchen: the oven was built to run on both gas and wood. (We never had any wood and the gas system was only working on the stove, so we ate a lot of omelettes for breakfast and spaghetti for dinner, and talked about how we meant to have the oven fixed.) The other thing: the bathroom, which was off the kitchen, was about an inch and a half lower than the rest of the house. Examination of the exterior walls showed it to be of a different date than the other rooms.

The house had another architectural oddity: two front doors, one connecting with what seemed to have been the living room and was now Marks bedroom, and the other with the front hallway which in turn led to Marks room and the kitchen. A clue to the origins of the two doors was offered by the windows above them: a fan-shaped window above the hallway door and a rectangular window above the bedroom/living room door. The fan-shaped window seems consistent with the general style of the house, a large, brick Federalist building built between 1817 and 1825. The window matches similar fan windows in the attic walls below the gabled ends of the roof and at 90° angles from the street.

The house, though not exceptional, is large and attractive, suggesting that its builder possessed a certain wealth. The date
is curious: Middletown was no longer the important port that it had been, and manufacturing had not yet become important, yet someone wanted to and could build a large house by the river. The builder’s name was Isaac Warner, a blacksmith who, according to Beers, served the schooners docking at Middletown. He "built a large smithy with 4 forges and also owned a farm in Long Hill." Victoria Bippart notes that in the city tax lists, Warner’s income is average, and wonders if his impressive properties do not indicate inherited wealth (p.23). Warner’s father was a ship’s captain, and while Warner could afford to build the house, it is possible that the house’s sale in 1836 marked a parallel decline in the business and fortune of the Warner family and Middletown based shipping. The small scale businesses which continued to exist around Ferry St were increasingly independent of the shipping trades.

Lest one get the wrong impression, it should be stated that neither when Warner built his house nor after he sold it was Ferry Street an elegant address. Rather, until the Civil War, it was home for skilled artisans and entrepreneurs who, if they became successful, would move to classier neighborhoods. The delayed recognition in Middletown of the railroad slowed this mobility and thus the vitality of the area. Another indication of the decline of the neighborhood is the fact that in the 30 years after Warner sold the house in 1836, the property’s value increased by only 25% (from $1600 to $2000) despite the fact that the street was much more built-up by this century.

The list of occupants of 33 Ferry St during the second half of the 19th century offers a hint of the changing character of the street and of the local economy:
(In 1853 the house was bought by) William S Camp, the proprietor of a "Boots and Shoes" store on Main St. Camp in turn sold the house in 1857 to James Bidwell, the teller at the Middlesex County National Bank. He shared the house with his wife, Sarah, a servant, Minnie Wilson, and his brother, Charles, who was also a teller at the same bank. Sarah Bidwell survived her husband and gave the house up in 1899. (p. 23)

Note the progression from Warner, the artisan, to the petty bourgeois Camp and finally to the employee. On the street as a whole, the declining wealth of those coming to live in the area was both reflected and encouraged by the division of many of the houses into apartments. Thus, according to Bippart, "Between 1860 and 1880 the number of inhabitants on Ferry St. grew from 38 to 132." (p.10). Among this new population were about 30 Irish immigrants who came to work in the regions factories and quarries.

Although immigrants were moving onto Ferry St by 1899, ownership remained largely Yankee. In the first decade of this century, that changed. In 1911, Samuel and Mary Wolstenholme, who bought the Warner house from Bidwell, sold their property to Antonio Amenta. (Amenta's mortgage was from Farmers & Mechanics Bank.) According to the titles, between 1899 and 1911, the owners of property bordering #33 changed from the Lawrence heirs, Bernhard, Fountain, and Dincock heirs (1899) to Bianchi, Santangelo, Middlesex Hospital, Battalin, and Rosenthal (1911). Starting around 1907 Italian shops began to appear in the area, and judging from the speed with which ownership changed hands, something like what was later called "white flight" seems to have taken place.

A cohesive Italian immigrant community quickly developed. When the Amentas moved to #33 in 1911, there was already an annual celebration of St. Sebastian's Day on Ferry St. The celebration
had its origins in a similar festival in Melilli honoring a statue of St Sebastian and its role in the rescue of some sailors shipwrecked off the coast of Sicily in 1414. (See Sangree pp. 88–90 for a full telling of the story.) The event supposedly took place at the end of April and the festival reached its climax on May 4. The statue, wrapped in gold and jewels is paraded around town; there are fireworks and bands; and a civic celebration is combined with religious rites.

In 1908, Sebastian Marchese, a Melillese mason living on Ferry St., made a plaster of paris replica of the St Sebastian statue. Marchese was motivated both by religious devotion and by fear that the Melillese in Middletown were forgetting their faith and origins. He displayed his handiwork and neighbors brought offerings of fruit which were then shared by all present. The celebration was also subsidized by Antonio Amenta who, even before he moved to #33, was a successful grocer.

In 1912, the festival was moved to Court St and became increasingly elaborate. Under the leadership of Santo Cannata, the festival was used to raise money to support the San Sebastian Church in Melilli and then to raise funds to build Saint Sebastian's in Middletown. During this time it was a custom to pin dollar bills to the Saint's cloak. (When this custom began is unclear; it seems to continue though!) The offerings people brought were auctioned instead of given away.

Many touches of the early festival remained. According to Sangree, "right up through the thirties, in the Italian section of town, women got their buckets and brushes and scrubbed the sidewalks in front of their houses in preparation for the feast. Trestle tables
were set up and free wine and beer was served to every passer-by." (p.101.)

(The real changes in the festival occurred under the leadership of Saint Sebastian's pastor, Father Keane. Sangree relates:

Gone today are the free beer and wine on the streets of the old Italian section of town. Under the skillful direction of Father Keane, the size of the procession, the magnificence of the fireworks display, and the festivities in the church itself have all increased. Financially, it has been made a tremendous asset; bazaars sell food and other articles donated by the parishioners; church lotteries, with various donated articles being used as prizes, are another source of revenue.

The practice right up through the thirties was to carry the statue through the streets on long poles borne on the shoulders of some of the younger men (n.b., here Sangree refers to a second statue of the saint that Marchese carved, much larger than the first); Father Keane relates how it used to upset him to see the bearers of the statue at the end of the day with their eyes bloodshot, completely fatigued from the strain of carrying it about and putting it down and picking it up again every time money was pinned on it. He finally persuaded them to put it on a cart which they hauled through the streets, and today it rides on an automobile. (pp.101-2.)

How Father Keane could stomach the images of Saint Sebastian or the crucifix is unclear to me, but I am convinced that the above passage, despite its length, is important for what it reveals about modernization of religious practices.)

Meanwhile, back in 1911, the Amentas #33. The evidence about whether the Amentas even lived there or immediately began renting to the Damiata family is contradictory. It is clear that by 1914 both the Amenta and their store had been moved to #31 Ferry St. Wherever it was in these years, the Amenta grocery store
was popular. According to J. V. Antonio, the shop "was patronized by many Melillessi from all parts of town including Portland." From this quote we can gather that while some of the forces which created the Italian community in the North End were external ones over which residents had not control (discrimination, for instance), in large part Italians came to the Ferry St area out of a desire to be in an familiar community.

Antonio Amenta owed his popularity, among the many Italian grocers from which residents could chose, in part to his role as a founder and leader of the Original Italian Band of Middletown, a group of about forty musicians begun in 1906 which played at religious celebrations, parades, concerts and funerals. The group, many of whom had played together in a brass band in Melilli, continued until around 1950. Most members were artisans as there was in Melilli a connection between learning an instrument ("solfaggio") and learning a trade. Both were passed from father to son and were the source of much family pride.

Another neighborhood grocer, Ettore D'Amiata, lived and maintained a shop at 46 Washington St. In 1914, he bought the 33 Ferry St. house from Amenta and converted the large, first-floor living room into a store. In order to make access easier for the public and more private for the family, D'Amiata added a second door, going directly into the living room/store. I asked Sal Damiata, the present owner and Ettore's son, why the windows above the two doors were different. He replied that he had never really noticed or thought about it.

In addition to opening the store, Damiata took in boarders. For the first fifteen years that the D'Amiatas lived at 33 Ferry St. the boarders were Italian laborers, fairly reflecting the
character of the neighborhood which was about 90% Italian with the rest evenly divided between Jewish and Anglo-Saxon names. These #33 boarders included both short and long-term residents. In 1916 for instance, D'Amiata had one tenant, Salvatore Shionte, a laborer. (This information and that that follows about tenants at #33 comes from the Middletown City Directories 1917-1970.) In 1917, D'Amiata eliminated the apostrophe from his name, Gerado Roccapriore was elected to the city council, and Antonio Milardo, another laborer became a boarder at Damiata's house.

In 1918, Shionte moved to 63 Ferry and Milardo moved to Cromwell. They were replaced by Sebastian Gionfriddo who lived at the house until 1922 when he moved to Pearl or Cherry St. That year, Veto Teti, another laborer moved in, and he lived at #33 until 1930.

In 1930, Veto Teti was replaced by Mrs. Angelina Cammarata and Angelo Tomasso, an employee of the railroad. (Cammarata was the maiden name of Damiata's wife suggesting that Angelina may have been Mrs. Damiata's widowed mother. I could not find out if the Angelo Tomasso who lived at #33 was the same one who owned the large construction firm that continues to operate throughout Central Connecticut.) Around 1930 and before most of their neighbors, the Damiatas got a telephone.

By 1933, the number of apartments for rent had increased to three with the store being moved next door to 31 Ferry, formerly the site of the Amenta shop. The store was now called a dry goods rather than a grocery store but the exact nature, time of and reason for the change are unclear. Eventually, Ettore Damiata and his son Frank would convert the #31 store into a tavern.

The 1933 boarders were Salvatore Amenta, a city employee and grocer (Antonio Amenta had a son named Salvatore and this may be he.), Isaac Paquette, also a city employee, and Joseph Formica whose occupation
is not listed in the Directory. BY 1933 there were several vacant
apartments on Ferry St., and in 1936 one of the Damiata's apartments
was vacant. The others were occupied by Paquette and one Francesco
Timpano. The Damiatas are no longer listed as having a phone.

In 1940 Paquette and Timpano were joined by Sebastian Bartollata.
On Ferry St. as a whole, Italians continue to dominate: 100 of the
112 names listed in the 1940 Directory are Italian, and of the others
no group stands out. Up the street from the Damiatas, and Italian
The paper showed up at the same time as L'Italia Nuova, also a weekly,
was removed from a city directory listing at 570 Main St. (just
north of the corner of Ferry and Main) suggesting that these papers
may have been the same. (At the Main street address at which the
Italia Nuova had been located for several years the paper shared its
building with the Italian Loan Association and the Italian Democratic
Club. The Ferry St. based Bulletin seems to be the work of Casare
Corvo and his son Max. This latter is now a Republican leader in
Middletown and continues to put out the Bulletin.)

In 1945 and 1950 the occupants are listed as Vincenza Damiata
(Ettore's wife), Francesco Timpano, Emmanuel Barone, and Sebastiano
Pascetta. Why the house was listed as being occupied by Mrs. and not
Mr. Damiaja is unclear. Born in 1884, he was too old to be in the
military, even during World War II. Ownership of the house had been
transferred to Vincenza back in 1923 but Ettore continued to be listed
as the occupant for the next 13 years. And Ettore outlived Vincenza:
she died in 1963, he in 1970. By 1960, Ettore is again the listed
occupant even though he only regained partial ownership (together
with the Damiata children) in 1963. In any case the Damiatas had their
phone back in 1945 so perhaps they talked on the phone.
In 1955, the occupants of #33 are Ettore Damiata, Frank Damiata, Timpano and Barone. It is Frank who is listed as running the tavern: presumably, Ettore had retired. In 1960, the Damiatas have only one boarder but there is no indication of vacancy, suggesting that Sal Damiata moved into one of the apartments or that two apartments were combined. The one boarder is Italian, but on Ferry St. as a whole the Italian community began to decline. By 1965, the occupants at #33 remain the Damiatas and one Italian boarder, but the city directory lists only 58 names on the street and only 66 of these are Italian. (While the street and the north end in general seemed to be marked by economic decline in these years, it should be noted that by 1955 and only by 1955 did telephones become more or less universal on Ferry St. Furthermore, the Italian community was not abandoning the North End as the non-Italians had between 1900 and 1910. In 1952, St. Sebastian's School was opened in the old Johnson public school on Green St., one block north of Ferry. Several Italian businesses continued (and still continue) to exist in and around Ferry St.)

The population of Ferry St continued to decline in 1970. While the construction of Rt 9 and the destruction of the eastern end of the street had been a cause of the declining numbers, they were not the only cause. Vacancies and condemnations reduced the space available, even if the street remained a crowded one. The decline was even more pronounced in the Italian community on Ferry St than in the street's population as a whole: in 1970 Italians outnumbered non-Italians by only 46 to 37. The new names seem to indicate a growing number of Blacks (this is suggested not by the lost names but by first names such as Willie) but not Hispanics. At #33N, Frank and Sal Damiata shared the house with two Italian boarders.
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The many Ferry St businesses were reduced to a restaurant, a restaurant/bakery, a bar and an occasionally open appliance store.

In 1978, when we moved into #33, Sal and his sister Rose were the only Dantata children still alive, and Sal maintained the building. As in the beginning of the century, there was a rapid turn-over among the tenants, none in the apartment above us lasting a year. Among these tenants were a young divorced woman who was co-owner of a trendy Main St restaurant (she moved out after repeated sexual harassment from a neighbor), a young working-class WASP couple with a baby (Her parents ran Krenz's Bar on Main St; he worked nights in a Portland factory; and they were evicted after trashing their apartment during a domestic brawl), and finally a large Hispanic family about which I never learned very much. For some reason, Sal didn't seem to mind Puerto Ricans, Orientals, or Jews in his house, only Blacks. He told me, "Danny, this is a free country and I don't have to let anybody in my house who I don't want, right?" We eventually moved out because Sal's insurance agent told him that he had to rebuild our bathroom or they would cancel the policy. We were going to raise the rent (yet again) to $260, having decided they Mark and I were a couple of bums. Sal had been a professional musician but he didn't play that electric stuff like Mark, and didn't want to hear it.

Despite periodic claims that the Main St restoration work was going to be extended to Ferry St., very little changed in the three years that we lived there. Two houses added aluminium siding, and one was boarded up. Most of the buildings are more likely candidates for removal than for gentrification. Sooner or later, some kind of "upgrading" might occur, through not until a similar process happens on Main St itself so that the whole downtown will be
more attractive to young affluent people. In any case, one of the few buildings on Main Street which might be restored is #33. Sal has been trying to find someone to give him money to restore the house for several years. He tried the government and even joined the Preservation Trust. I asked him if he was interested in the history of the house and what he thought about living in such a historic building. He said, "Don't let them fool you: they're just a bunch of crooks, just like us." Anyway, he added, they said that they couldn't give him any money to put into the house.

At some point somebody will probably get around to fixing up the Warner House; at some point the remaining Italian businesses (the only businesses on the street) will probably close; some of the rattier houses will be torn down and their residents removed to some similar neighborhood in Middletown or nearby. What seems unlikely is that the neighborhood will become what it was in the first half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: a community that was not rich but was, along with much of American society in general, hopeful of the future and rightly so.
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Aug. 23, 1816 | Daniel Arnold, Jr. to Edward Carrington and Samuel Wetmore. Warranty Deed. MLR 44:365

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* House was built between 1817 and 1825.