

Site: M: 26/10/57

Edwin Smith House

108 Forest Avenue

Built: 1890      Builder: Edwin West

Private

Edwin Smith was an internationally known astronomer when he constructed this house in consultation with Edwin West and Harvey Page, using plans from the Scientific American magazine. Mr. Smith erected an observatory in the back yard. The Smith house was used in 1963 in the filming of the movie "Lilith". Four generations of Smiths have owned the building, which remains in near-original condition.

# Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form

Survey No. <sup>M</sup> 26/10/57

Magi No. 1650732604

DOE  yes  no

## 1. Name (indicate preferred name)

historic The Smith House

and/or common

## 2. Location

street & number 108 Forest Avenue  not for publicationcity, town Rockville  vicinity of congressional district 8state Maryland county Montgomery

## 3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> not applicable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> other:

## 4. Owner of Property (give names and mailing addresses of all owners)

name Mr. and Mrs. Merdad Ebrahimistreet & number 108 Forest Avenue telephone no.: 762-2354city, town Rockville state and zip code Maryland 20850

## 5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Montgomery Co. Land Records liber 6073street & number Montgomery Co. Courthouse folio 731city, town Rockville state Maryland

## 6. Representation in Existing Historical Surveys

title National Register of Historic Places, 1974date City of Rockville Historic District, 1974  federal  state  county  localdepository for survey records City of Rockvillecity, town Rockville state Maryland

# 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site	
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved	date of move _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed			

Prepare both a summary paragraph and a general description of the resource and its various elements as it exists today.

The Smith house faces east on Forest Avenue near the center of the block formed by Anderson and Beall Avenues. On the east facade, the cement walkway is lined with English boxwoods. Two large evergreens shade the south elevation of the house. A gravel driveway runs along its north side. A small, gable-roof frame observatory structure was located at the western perimeter of the property some sixty feet behind the house; the observatory was demolished in 1985.

This sixteen-room house was built in 1890 by Edwin West, a prominent Rockville builder. The house is an adaptation from photographs and floor plans of Sound Hill View, a suburban villa overlooking Long Island Sound near New York City. The house was inspired by a photograph from the Architects and Builders Edition of the Scientific American, published in October 1888.

Specifications of the work and materials required in the construction of this \$6,500 house suggest that the drawings for the house were prepared originally by an architect, probably Harvey Page. The drawings consisted of a cellar, first and second stories and attic plans, front, rear and side elevations, sections and details. The contract between Mrs. Lucy Smith and Mr. West states that the "drawings and specifications are the property of the Owner, are not to be copied or be used for any other building, and must be returned to her at completion of the work." These drawings and specifications remain with the present owners, members of the Smith family.

A comparison of the original drawings and old photographs of the present house shows that modifications were made before or during construction. These modifications include the elimination of a turret on the south facade and the extension of the front porch to partially wrap around both the north and south facades. A planned rear addition appears to have been altered relatively early. The roof is unusual as it is gabled on the east, west and south sides, while on the north it has a gambrel form. The semi-circular balcony with balustrade on the east facade is copied from the plan in Scientific American.

The 2-and-1/2-story house is basically in a rectangular shape with two rear one-story additions at the northwest corner. It is constructed of Virginia pine and sits on a stone foundation. Clapboard siding sheathes the house. The roof has three gables, one on the east, west, and south facades. The roof is covered with Buckingham slate, while the gables are faced with fish-scaled shaped cypress shingles. The front porch is supported on brick piles with lattice work between.

Two-over-two and one-over-one windows are found on the house. Most have wooden louvered shutters. There are two interior chimneys visible on the north side of the house. A chimney once visible on the west side of the roof has been removed. Horizontal lightning rods are on the edge of the roof.

Continued on attachment 7.1

M: 26/10/57  
The Smith House  
Attachment 7.1

The east facade of the main block is three bays wide with an even fenestration on the second story. The center bay window is narrower than its flanking windows and opens onto a semi-circular balcony. This distinctive feature has a wooden balustrade and posts; its sides are covered with fish-scale Buckingham slate. Two one-over-one windows highlight the gable at the southeastern corner. The first story of this facade has two-over-two windows in the first and third bays. The middle bay is slightly off-center with double exterior and screen doors; A small seven-light window is set to the upper left of the door. A wide open porch wraps around the east, north and south facades, with wooden posts and curved braces supporting a shed roof. The posts are connected by a wooden balustrade that continues down the front steps.

The south facade has four bays: two in the projecting south gable, two in the recessed side of the front gable. There is an even fenestration of two-over-two windows. Two one-over-one windows are centered in the gable pediment. Wooden porch steps provide access from the side.

The west (rear) facade has an uneven fenestration. On the first story are five two-over-two windows. Three two-over-two windows are on the second story centered above the three middle first-story windows. A single one-over-one window is centrally located in the gable pediment.

The north facade is asymmetrically arranged, with six two-over-two windows: five on the main block, one in the one-story addition. Two unaligned windows are in the gambrel roof end, which is accented by return eaves that almost meet in the center.

At the northwest corner of the house are two one-story additions with shed roofs. A small one-over-one window is in the upper left corner of the first addition. An exterior door is set in the rear of the second addition.

#### Observatory

An east-facing gable structure with German siding stood at the rear center of the property from 1891 to 1985. Decorative, Victorian detailing was located in each gable. Doors, centrally placed on each gable end, provided access to the building. The east facade had flanking window openings on the east gable. A large roof opening on both the north and south sides and a side opening on the south were used for the Zenith telescope. The observatory was dismantled sometime between March and August 1985 by the owners.

# 8. Significance

Survey No. H-26/10/57

<b>Period</b>	<b>Areas of Significance—Check and justify below</b>			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
				local history

**Specific dates** \_\_\_\_\_ **Builder/Architect** \_\_\_\_\_

House 1890, Observatory 1891 Edwin West, Builder

check: Applicable Criteria:  A  B  C  D \_\_\_\_\_

and/or

Applicable Exception:  A  B  C  D  E  F  G \_\_\_\_\_

Level of Significance:  national  state  local \_\_\_\_\_

Prepare both a summary paragraph of significance and a general statement of history and support.

### Significance

The Smith house is significant for its association with an internationally known astronomer and geophysicist who participated in its plan and construction both as a family home and as a site for scientific studies. Architecturally, the house combines a published Queen Anne House plan with modifications suggested by Mr. Smith and construction by a local master builder, Edwin West. The Smith House remains in near original condition, while the observatory outbuilding has been dismantled.

### History and Support

Edwin Smith was an astronomer employed by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey soon after his graduation from college in 1870. 1/ Although not yet 40 when he first summered in Rockville in 1888, he had already achieved reknown for his discoveries in gravity and astronomy. The pleasant town within easy commuting distance to his Washington office appealed to the Smith family as a site for their proposed summer cottage. 2/ In October 1888 two lots were purchased from the old Julius West estate, one from Sarah West McCahill for \$675, the more northern lot from the Trustees of the Rockville Academy. 3/ Mrs. Lucy Scott Smith named the newly platted street on which their lots fronted "Forest Avenue".

Mrs. Smith was a native of New Orleans, where her father had been President of the Cotton Exchange. Mrs. Smith and her widowed mother desired a house with New Orleans-type galleries, but in its planning stages the original small cottage ballooned to a sixteen room mansion to accommodate nurseries, rooms for six children, the necessary library-study for Mr. Smith, servant quarters and a three-sided verandah. 4/

Continued on attachment 8.1

The design of the Smith House is based on plans and photographs for "Sound Hill View", built on Long Island Sound and illustrated in the October 1888 Architects and Builders Edition of The Scientific American (p. 79). 5/ However, certain modifications to the published plan were made. Mr. Smith, one of the founding members of the prestigious Cosmos Club in Washington, shared membership with several Washington architects. 6/ The name of Harvey Page is found on the first page of the extant specifications as responsible for the drawings, but Mr. Page's name has been crossed out and "Edwin Smith" substituted, evidence of Mr. Smith's direct hand in the design. Harvey Page specialized in "high-style" Romanesque Revival structures. During this period he was designing mansions for the McLean and Hearst families, as well as an Opera House and hotels in Washington. 7/ It is assumed that Mr. Page (as a friend) assisted Mr. Smith by preparing drawings of the house with its proposed modifications; however, no evidence exists that Harvey Page was otherwise involved in the actual plans or construction. Edwin Smith chose local master-builder Edwin West to construct the house, and required that the plans be the sole property of the Smiths, not to be copied on any other buildings Mr. West might construct.

In accordance with these instructions, Smith House features several details not found in other Rockville homes. A semi-circular platform balcony faced with slate is centered on the front facade over the entry; the unusual roof form has gables on three sides and a gambrel roof on the north facade. An ornamental one-story turret supported by corbelling and topped with a peaked roof was eliminated from the plans during construction. The final cost of \$6,500 was considerably higher than other local houses. The house was completed in June, 1890 and the Smiths moved into what would be a permanent family residence for four generations, far from the original idea of a small summer cottage.

The following year a plain wood frame outbuilding was constructed in the rear garden. The Coast and Geodetic Survey commissioned the building of this observatory to facilitate the study of the earth's longitudinal net. 8/ Between June 1891 and July 1892 Mr. Smith made 1,800 observations from this site, plotting the stars as part of a successful world-wide scientific effort to measure the "wobble" of the earth. Smith's nightly observations were considered voluntary; his large salary of \$2,000 a year was thought to be adequate for his efforts.

Over the next few years the family was often parted when scientific expeditions to Alaska, the Orient, or Australia occupied Mr. Smith. He was frequently gone for months at a time. Mrs. Smith busied herself in the town's cultural activities and was a loyal member of the Rockville Presbyterian Church where she played the organ. 9/ The Smiths donated a lot north of their home to the Church for construction of a parsonage; "the manse" was completed in 1891 and retains its original use.

Mr. Smith continued his labors and contributions to science even after stricken with cancer, and died at the Smith House in 1912. Before his death he requested of his children that the house remain in the family. One son, Harold Smith, was an attorney and later Judge of the Police Court, but the house is primarily associated with his daughter, Lucy Neville Smith, who preserved the family home although financial reverses required her to seek employment. She spent almost 40 years as an employee of the Veterans Administration.

Miss Lucy was beloved in Rockville. Her memories of her father and the 92 years of town history that she witnessed are published in several sources. In 1963, film crews scouting suitable locations for the movie "Lilith" chose this large old-fashioned house as evocative of the mood and period setting of Jack Salamanca's book. 10/ The director of the movie not only used the Smith House for location shots, but persuaded Miss Lucy to play Warren Beatty's grandmother in the film. Miss Lucy described the value of her movie debut as "...worth enough to repaper the house." 11/

Miss Lucy lived to be 92, dying in 1980 with her reputation for charm, ebulliance and intellectual honesty intact. In her later years, nieces and nephews of the third and fourth generation of Smiths joined her in residence at the house. The present occupants are the great-grandchildren of "Mr. Astronomer Smith". 12/

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Footnotes:

1. Wilcove, Raymond, "Memories of Mr. Smith", NOAA Magazine, U.S. Department of Commerce, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1972, p52.
2. "Miss Lucy Smith Talks About Forest Avenue", interview with Lorraine Gaddis, April 23, 1974. (Montgomery County Historical Society.)
3. Montgomery County Land Records, JA11/237 & 238. The house was sited on Lot #13 of Lockett's Subdivision of McCahills Land (Plat Record A55 &56).
4. Gaddis, op. cit..
5. Smith papers and contracts. Interviews with Smith family.
6. The Cosmos Club was founded in 1876 as a social/cultural club for men distinguished in the fields of arts, sciences, and letters.
7. The buildings designed by Harvey Page are detailed in Capital Losses, James M. Goode's compilation of Washington's destroyed buildings. Page worked from 1878 as Gray and Page and after 1885 by himself. As of 1979, only one building remains of Mr. Page's work. See Capital Losses, p. 358-359 and others.
8. NOAA Magazine, op.cit. p 51.
9. Miss Lucy succeeded her mother in the post of Church organist. Harold Smith was also an officer and served as attorney for the Church (Rockville Presbyterian Church Newsletter published at the dedication of a new church building in 1930). Montgomery County Historical Society files.
10. The Bill, March 1973.
11. Ibid.
12. NOAA Magazine, op. cit.. So called by local citizens to distinguish him from another contemporary Mr. Smith in Rockville.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

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Smith family interviews, papers, published memoirs from Historical Society collection, extant contract and drawings; Montgomery County Land, Plat Records; Capital Losses, Smithsonian Press (1979); Various newspapers and magazines including Scientific American (1888), NOAA magazine ; Presbyterian Church Histories and newsletters.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 50,747 square feet

Quadrangle name \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle scale \_\_\_\_\_

UTM References do NOT complete UTM references

A [ ][ ] [ ][ ][ ][ ] [ ][ ][ ][ ][ ]  
Zone Easting Northing

B [ ][ ] [ ][ ][ ][ ] [ ][ ][ ][ ][ ]  
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## Verbal boundary description and justification

Fronting 150 feet on west side of Forest Avenue by a depth of 307 feet.

## List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Norene A. Halvonik / Anne Cissel / Dwayne Jones

organization Peerless Rockville date June 1985

street & number P.O. Box 4262 telephone 762-0096

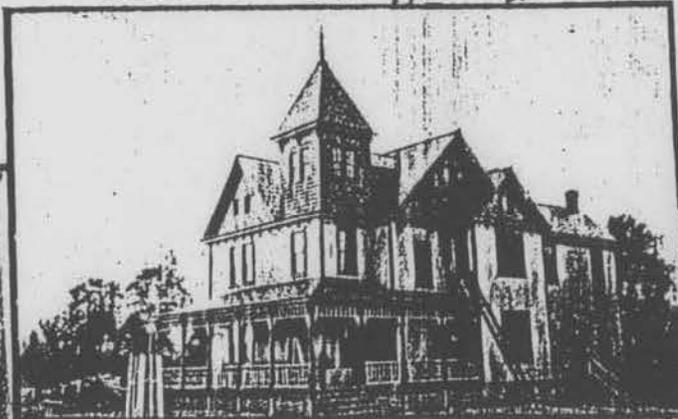
city or town Rockville state Maryland 20850

The Maryland Historic Sites Inventory was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

The survey and inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

return to: Maryland Historical Trust  
Shaw House  
21 State Circle  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401  
(301) 269-2438

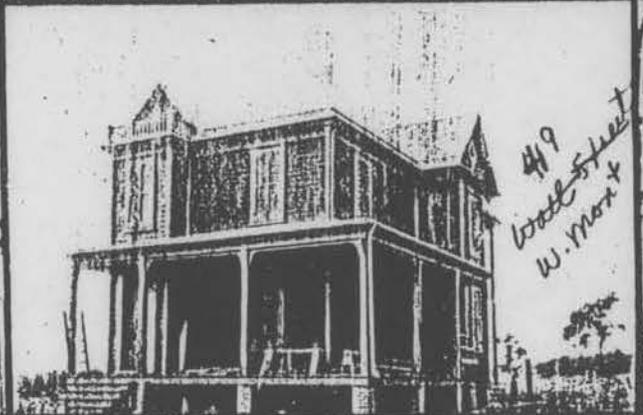
Allnutt 541 Bell Avenue (1890)



401  
W. Montgomery  
1889  
1150



409  
W. Montgomery  
1888



419  
West Street  
W. Montgomery



1890  
Mason  
112 Forest Avenue



108 Forest Avenue

E. Smith  
1890

M:26-10-57



RICHARD H. ANDREWS  
424-8282  
1608 FARRAGUT AVE.  
ROCKVILLE, MD 20851

OPPS-7

M. 26/10/57  
Smith House  
208 Forest Ave.  
Boekville  
8-85