



Birchwood
Archaeological Services

The Isaac Titus House History *Coxsackie, New York*

by
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The Isaac Titus House

(excerpted from full Phase II report)

Historic Overview

Greene County New York sits in the northern region of the Catskill Mountains. Established in 1800, it was named for the Revolutionary War hero Nathaniel Greene. The Greene County seat is Catskill. The Village of Cocksackie was incorporated in 1867 allowing collection of taxes for sewer, water, streetlights, and police protection. Both the Town and Village of Cocksackie took their names from "Cocksackie", an Algonquin word variously believed to mean "Place of Owls", "Migrating Geese", or "Cut Rocks" (Beauchamp 1907).

Pioneers settled on a small parcel of 6 acres purchased from the Indians in 1652. The old stone Pieter Bronk House on Cocksackie Creek was built in 1663, one year before the Dutch colonial government lost control to the English in the Hudson Valley (Ebenlein and Hubbard 1962). Casparus Bronk built the first sawmill in Cocksackie in 1750 (Fox 1976). The First Reformed Church, the oldest Church in Greene County, was established in 1732.

The oldest highway in the town is the King's Road of 1710. This road, which lead from King's Road to the river, was laid out in 1790 and ran "between the line of Peter Bronk, Richard Bronk and Anthony Van Bergen" and son on "to the dock of Ephraim Bogardus on the North River, to the high water mark." In 1793, the road at the head of the landing is described as "leading from the dwelling house of Eliakim Reed to Cocksackie Landing", and, in 1806, the Cocksackie Turnpike was built (Vedder 1927).

Greene County is rich in the military history of the Revolutionary War. On May 17, 1775, 225 inhabitants, mostly Dutch freeholders from the Cocksackie District of the Colony of New York, signed a Declaration of Independence of their own; one year before the Continental Congress did so in Philadelphia. The first signer, John (Johannes) Schuneman, was undoubtedly the "Dutch Dominie of the Catskills". There is enough authentic data on the Dominie to provide assurance that he personally drew up this Declaration of Independence (Rockwell 1867).

During the 1800's, Cocksackie thrived in shipbuilding, ice harvesting and transportation of merchandise, as her geographical location was at the shortest river crossing between New York and Albany (Vedder 1927). Before the opening of the Erie Canal, a great part of commerce traveled through Greene County, and the flourmills at the falls of the Catskill Creek were the most important in New York. Just after the War of 1812, tanners bought great tracks of hemlock in the Catskills and built extensive leather making plants.

The West Shore Railroad, which ran through West Cocksackie, had its trestle built by hand, digging under the tracks in 1935. Presently, tourism based upon its history and rural setting is a growing economy in Greene County. The Reed Street Historic District and Riverside Park in Cocksackie still maintain the appearance of an early river community, and were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Currently, Greene County is experiencing economic expansion in technology and business development due to its location and to the presence of natural resources along the corridor of the Hudson River valley from New York City

to Albany.

Deeding of the Isaac Titus Property

The deed for the property that now pertains to the 0.96 acre project area with its three structures belongs to the owners Sylvia Van Denburgh, Thelma Stegville and Carol Gates. The deed was passed into their hands in 1985 from the estate of John Moberg (Liber 583:320) who in turn had received it from Victor S. Gray in 1944 (294:18). Victor Gray, along with his wife Maragaret T. Gray and William Keller, received the deed to the property in the year 1930 from a Mrs. Minnie Winne (Liber 257:63). Winne received the deed from John D. Truesdell. The property that was included in this deed passed Truesdell to Winne had come to Truesdell from two sources in two different years. The first, received from William Keller in 1892 includes the tract of land and its structures that now encompasses the project area. This tract of land passed from Keller to Truesdell is described as such in the deed in Book No.130, page 66:

All that tract, piece or parcel of land, situate in the Town of Coxsackie, County of Greene and State of New York, bounded as follows: On the north by the land of Robert Henry Vanbergen, on the east by land formerly owned by Stephen Truesdell and Stephen Kline and the Coxsackie Branch Turnpike, on the west by land formerly owned by Henry M. Vandenburgh, now deceased, and containing about forty acres of land, being land formerly owned by Hallett Titus upon which then was situate a gristmill, sawmill and plaster mill.

(note: Already by this point, in 1892, the gristmill, sawmill and plaster mill are referred to in the past tense implying their previous demise.)

The deed trail can be traced further. William Keller received his deed for the land described above in 1882 from a Mr. James N. Dewitt (Liber 101:40) and Dewitt, only 14 years earlier in 1868 had received the property from Mrs. Matilda Titus, widow of Isaac Titus (Liber 71:114). In both transfers, the property is described the same as above specifying a 40-acre tract formerly owned by Hallett Titus. The deed for this property could not be traced any further within the post-1800 deed records at the Greene County Courthouse. There is no record of Isaac receiving the property from his father, or that his father even owned the property except for the reference to his name in the description above.

Documentary sources confirm that Isaac Titus lived at one point near Medway, NY in the town of New Baltimore. According to J.B. Beers in his *History of Greene County*, "About 1835 Isaac Titus built a saw-mill near the present residence of Spencer Palmer" (Beers 1884:372), who lived close to or within the village of Medway in New Baltimore (cemetery records from Medway Hill Cemetery). Jessie Van Vedder, former Green County Historian writes "About 1787 Charles Titus built a saw mill on Titus creek, and in 1808 he had a store and ashery. Hallett Titus early built a grist mill, the first in that part of the towns, on Honey Hollow creek. This mill was taken down in 1808, but his son Isaac settled a short distance west of Medway, where he built a steam saw and turning mill" (Vedder 1927).

Titus Creek is an arbitrary name here, as it could refer to any number of creeks where any number of Titus' had milling establishments. Historic maps dating back to early 19th century as well as documentary references as early as the original division of land in Greene County assert the name of what is present day Climax Creek was once Murder's Kill. It is likely that once Titus had built a mill on the creek it became known for a short period as Titus Creek.

Isaac Titus, like his father before him, owned many tracts of land where he likely had milling establishments. The Grantor/Grantee Index of deeds at the Greene County Courthouse lists numerous tracts of land passed into the hands of Isaac.

The 1866 Beers map of project area shows the house belonging to Mrs. M.C. Titus, more than likely referring to Matilda Titus, widow of Isaac Titus. The following year Matilda sold the property which included the house, outbuildings and 40 acres to James N. Dewitt. Matilda, whose maiden name was DeWitt, was born in 1819 and died in 1890 as records from the

Architectural Assessment

A historic architectural assessment was conducted by Anna Blinn, Staff Architectural Historian. An examination of the form, style, and materials associated with the house were emphasized in the assessment. This component included the preparation of floor plans for each of the story of the Titus house as well as photographing each of the rooms as well as any significant architectural details noted during the investigations.

Analysis of the Building by Floors

The drawings found in Figures 9-11 are of the existing conditions of the Titus House and are schematically drawn to indicate the various building episodes the building underwent. Very little is known about this house aside from what can be gathered from its physical study. In this preliminary assessment of the house, existing fabrics are dated in approximate terms as more extensive dating techniques were not applied.

The first building episode occurred between the late 18th century and the mid-19th century. There is at least one additional building episode and possibly two; all episodes are outlined in the descriptions and drawings.

Basement

The rooms of the basement have been modified over the years for various functions. B-1 and B-2 were part of the original construction of the house. B-3, B-4, B-5 and B-6 were part of later building episodes. Of these rooms, B-2, B-5 and B-6 are inaccessible.

Room B-1: The original dirt floor remains unaltered. The foundation walls are mortared fieldstone. The fieldstone appears to have been whitewashed at some point (Photo 29). One large rock protrudes from the western wall suggesting it was not movable in the building of the house so it was left in place (Photo 29). The beams supporting the first floor are round mature trees with bark still intact in many places (Photos 27 and 28).

Room B-3: The original dirt floor remains. This room is largely inaccessible due to debris. The interior walls are mortared fieldstone while the exterior walls are concrete block.

Room B-4: The original dirt floor remains. This room contains a brick and stone kiln at one time believed to be a home forgery (Photo 30). The chimney from the forgery kiln extends up through the dinning room (enclosed). The kiln has a rounded base constructed from pressed bricks. There is a small metal door to the right of the main kiln body. Any other openings in the kiln have now been filled. Scrap metal and tools appear strewn throughout the room. It is possible the fireplace in this room at one point served as a kitchen for the household. The bricks date no earlier than the turn of the 20th century, so it is likely that the hearth and fireplace were built at the time of the second building episode and not part of the original configuration of the structure. The exterior walls are concrete block. The floor joists and boards for the first floor are visible on the ceiling.

First Floor

Rooms 6, 7 and 8 were part of the original section of the house built in the early 19th century. Rooms 1, 2 and 3 were added in the second building episode, which is likely to have been at the turn of the 20th century. Rooms 4 and 5 along with the porches on the east and south sides of the building may have been added in a third building episode, but that is not entirely clear.

Rooms 1 and 2: Part of the second building episode, this is the entry space and contains the west facing (front) door. Off Room 1 is a small closet, Room 2, which contains five full-length shelves. The walls and ceiling of both rooms are plastered. The exterior door may be original to the addition (Photos 12 and 13).

Room 3: Also part of the second building episode, this room was most recently the dining area. The east wall is flanked by three conjoined one-over-one sash windows. The floor is covered in hard wood, uniform in width at approximately 2.5 inches, which likely dates to the construction of the addition around the turn of the 19th century. A decorative wood floor border with darker wood accents the edges of the room. This room contains three doorways, one to the basement steps, one into Room 6 (this doorway may have been originally an exterior door before the addition) and one into Room 4. The walls and ceiling are plastered (Photo 14).

Room 4: Moving from Room 3 into Room 4 there is a step down. This suggests it was part of a later building episode. This room was most recently used as a kitchen. The floor is covered with carpet. The walls are covered with a blue tile on the bottom and plastic sheeting on the top half. A large one-over-one window sits prominently in the center of the eastern wall. The ceiling is covered with original bead board. For the first half of the 20th century, bead board was a rather humble decorative material generally applied to the ceilings of porches and on the wainscotings of less significant buildings. The presence of bead board on this ceiling of this room, and also being a step lower, suggests that this room was once a porch (Photo 15).

Room 5: It is likely that if Room 4 was once a porch, Room 5 was also a porch. The bathroom fixtures likely date from the time of the addition. The walls are partially covered in faux-wood paneling and plaster. One one-over-one light window is on the northern wall (Photo 16).

Room 6: As part of the original structure, this room most likely served as the parlor. A woodstove stood in the northeast corner where a stovepipe scar still adorns the wall. Two one-

over-one windows flank the eastern wall. One one-over-one light window and an exterior door are on the southern wall (Photo 17). Stairs leading to the second floor occupy the western wall along with a door to two side rooms (Rooms 7 and 8) (Photo 18). The exposed beams on the ceiling are not original and are not structural and were likely added in some phase of construction to give a certain aesthetic appearance to the room. The walls and ceiling are both plastered. The floor maintains the same hardwood covering and detailing as Room 3. This is likely to have been installed on top of the original flooring at the time of the second building episode to give continuity to the house.

Rooms 7 and 8: These two rooms were most recently used as bedrooms. They are similar in size and are part of the original early-19th century structure. It is not immediately evident if they were originally two rooms or one. Both rooms have various layers of floor covering and wallpaper (Room 8 has been painted over the wallpaper), some of which may date as early as the early-mid 19th century. The windows in these rooms are double sash, one-over-one light (Photos 19 and 20).

Second Floor

Rooms 9, 10, 11 and 12 are all part of the original structure. The second floor is what may be considered a half-story being that the gable slope of the roof begins just 3.5 feet above the floor.

Room 9: This room contains the stair well as well as the entrances to the three other rooms on the second floor. The hall contains one small double sash one-over-one light window on the south wall (Photo 21). The floor is covered in various fabrics with an older linoleum being the latest layer. Toward the south wall an earlier floor covering is exposed. This material has a rough canvas base with an oil-based paint coating on top (Photo 26).

Rooms 10 and 11: These two rooms were also most recently used as bedrooms like the rooms beneath them. Each room contains one double sash two-over-two light on the west wall (Photos 22 and 23). Exposed floor boards in Room 11 are especially wide varying between 8 and 12 inches (Photo 23). Room 10 has a burn scar on the floor which appears to have damaged the upper layers of floor covering and also the floor boards themselves (Photo 24). This may have been the result of an over-turned oil lamp. Decorative baseboard in Room 10 is likely to be original (Photo 22). The walls have been painted over wallpaper.

Room 12: Once two rooms, this large room comprises a little under half of the upper story. A clear demarcation of where the dividing wall once stood is visible on the floor, walls and ceiling. The flooring is on one side newer wood strips installed on top of the original flooring. The flooring on the other side is older linoleum. The walls have been painted directly over the wallpaper (Photo 25).

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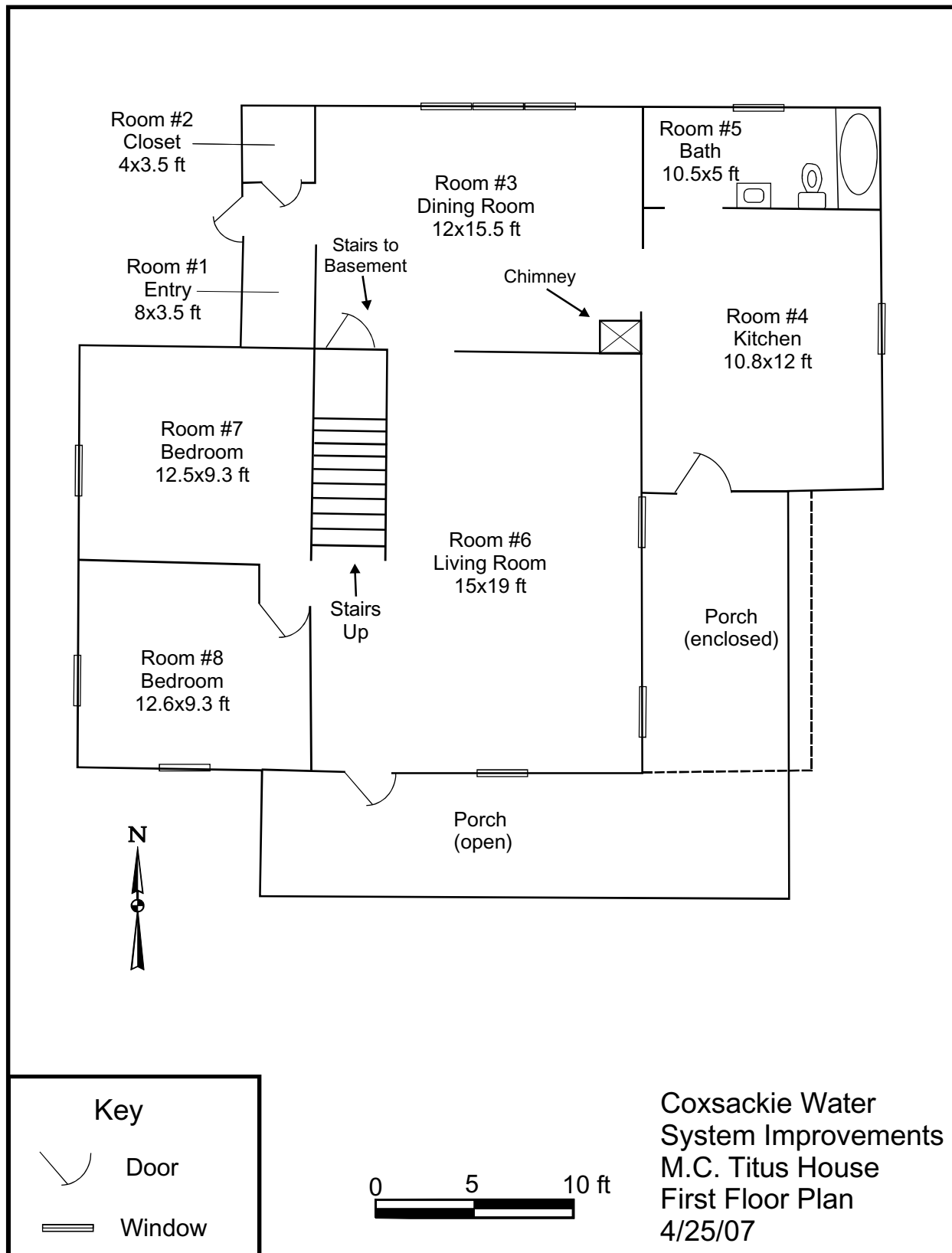


Figure 9. Floor plan of the first story of the M.C. Titus House.

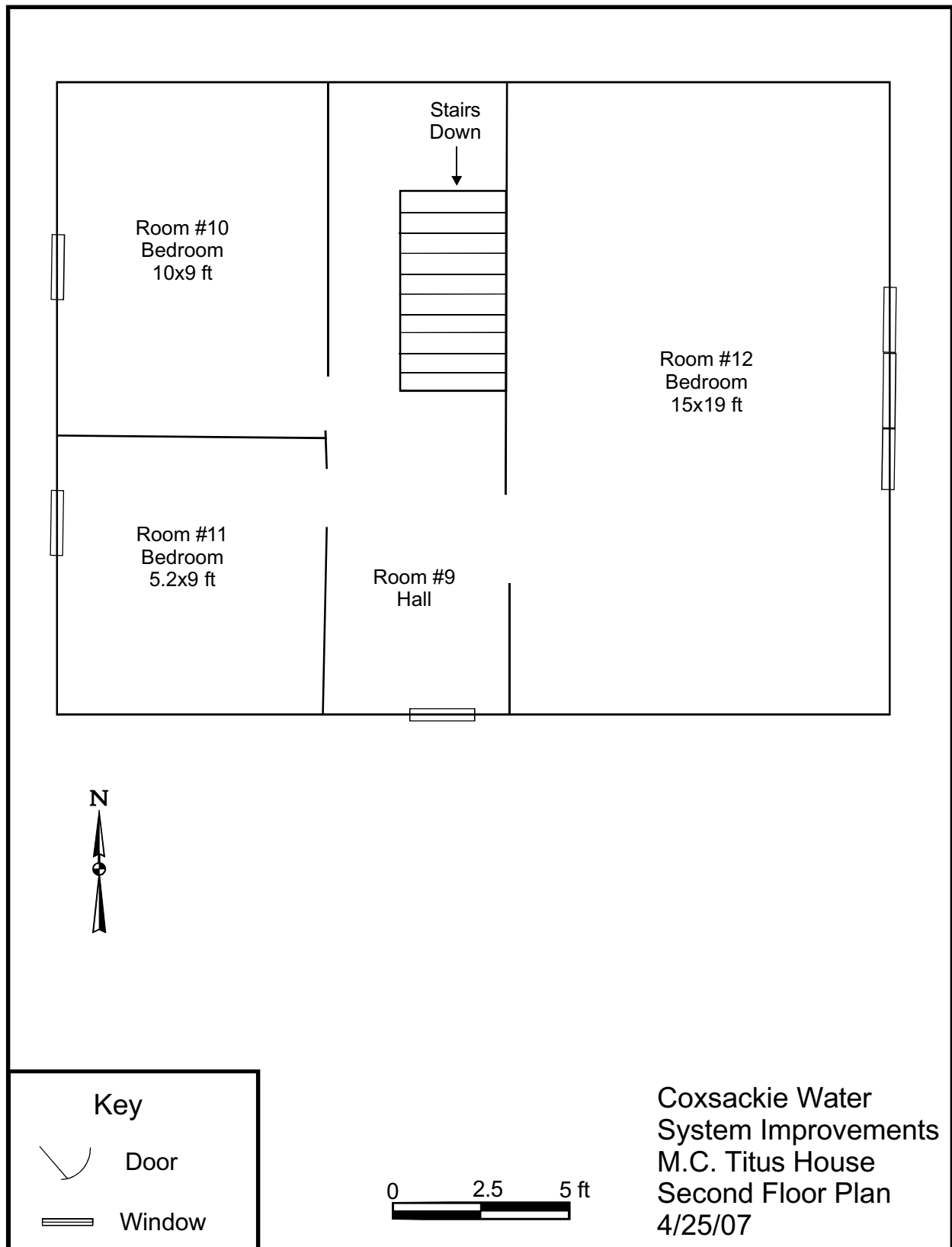


Figure 10. Floor plan of the second story of the M.C. Titus House.

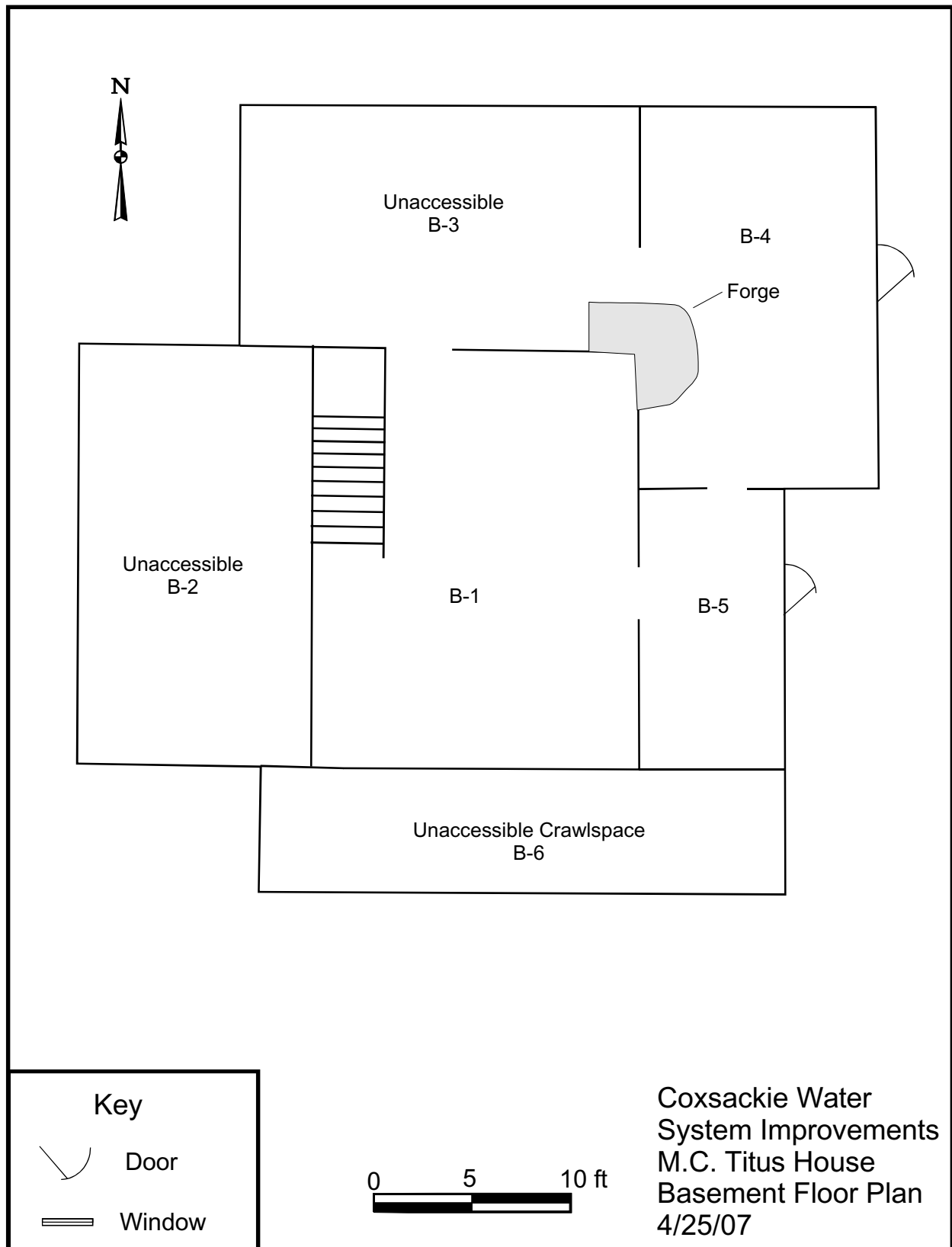


Figure 11. Floor plan of the basement of the M.C. Titus House.