

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
June 28, 2016, Designation List 488  
LP-0339

**George William and Anna Curtis House**, 234 Bard Avenue, Staten Island.  
Built c. 1859; Architect not determined.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island, Tax Map Block 138, Lot 166.

On September 13, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the George William and Anna Curtis House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 28). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Two people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Municipal Art Society.

On October 22, 2015, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a special public hearing on the proposed designation of the George William and Anna Curtis House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. I—Borough of Staten Island Group I, B). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Five people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the Historic District Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Victorian Society New York. The Commission also received written submissions expressing support for designation from the Municipal Art Society, the Society for the Architecture of the City, and the Preservation League of Staten Island.



Summary

Built in 1859, the George William and Anna Curtis House is an excellent example of a pattern-book-inspired Italianate style country residence and was the home of the notable reformist George William Curtis. The house was built in Elliottville, an area that was developed in the 1840s by Samuel MacKenzie Elliot, a prominent eye surgeon, activist, and abolitionist, who attracted a group of notable like-minded reformists to the neighborhood; residents included

the abolitionist, Sydney Howard Gay, the progressive reform leader, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and George William Curtis. The Curtises lived most of their lives together in the house at 234 Bard Avenue. George William Curtis was a distinguished author, editor, essayist, and lecturer. He was a writer for *Putnam's Magazine* and later for various Harper Brothers publications including *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. A progressive thinker and persuasive lecturer, he addressed major political issues of the day, such as slavery, women's suffrage, and civil service reform. Anna Curtis was active in local organizations and came from a like-minded family of reformists. In addition to its significant associations with George William and Anna Curtis, the house is a fine example of a vernacular free-standing Italianate style country residence. Sharing similarities with the design for "An Ornamental Farm House" in Andrew Jackson Downing's pattern book, *Cottage Residences*, the house exemplifies the influence of pattern books and Downing's work on American 19<sup>th</sup>-century residential architecture.

## BUILDING DESCRIPTION

Built in 1859, the George William and Anna Curtis House is a two-and-a-half-story frame, Italianate style country residence. The building appears to have a small one-story rear addition that was added prior to 1967. Besides the addition and a projecting side entrance added to the north facade, the building retains its historic form. The front façade of the house has been restored. The work included the restoration of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century porch, the restoration of brackets under the window sills and eaves, the replacement of window sashes and shutters, and the removal of aluminum siding, which was replaced with wooden clapboards.<sup>1</sup>

### **Bard Avenue (East) facade**

*Historic:* Two-and-a-half-stories with a center gable; original window openings; full-length one-story porch.

*Alterations:* Porch columns have been replaced and differ slightly from their original appearance; the front door with sidelights is not original to the house; window sashes, clapboard siding, stairs, and brackets under cornice and window sills have been replaced, but are historically accurate.

### **South (Henderson Avenue) facade**

*Historic:* Retains original form with eastern portion featuring a two-bay, two-and-a-half-story gable; retains some historic window openings; with the exception of the altered window openings, the window sashes retain their historic configuration.

*Alterations:* One-story rectangular bay window added; two window openings on western side reduced in size; brackets under cornice and window sills removed; pipes; conduit; shutters; dormer simplified; aluminum siding; band courses no longer visible; area under eaves enclosed; storm windows.

### **West (Rear) façade**

Facade is largely obscured from the public right of way by vegetation and a garage.

*Historic:* Window openings on either side of the rear gable; window sashes retain their historic configuration; portion of historic siding with band courses visible on north side of gable.

*Alterations:* Brackets under window sills and the cornice of the rear gable removed; aluminum siding; shutters; storm windows; windows added to rear gable; band courses no longer visible on portion of the south facade to the east side of the rear gable; area under eaves enclosed.

### **North facade**

Facade is partially visible from Bard Avenue.

*Historic:* Retains general form with western portion featuring a single bay two-and-a-half-story gable; retains some historic window openings; with the exception of the altered window openings, the windows sashes retain their historic configuration; small portion of wooden siding revealed.

*Alterations:* Brackets under cornice and window sills removed; shutters; aluminum siding; band course no longer visible; storm windows; French doors added onto deck; area under eaves enclosed; light fixtures; pipes; electrical box; conduit; vent; projecting side entrance with hipped roof added prior to 1967.

**Addition**

*Alterations:* Brackets below window sills removed; shutters; storm windows; electrical boxes; conduit; pipes; light fixtures.

**Roof**

*Alterations:* Chimneys; asphalt shingles; skylight.

**Site**

*Alterations:* Deck and pergola on north side of building; swimming pool with fence; garage in rear.

## SITE HISTORY

### Elliottville<sup>2</sup>

Elliottville was developed in the 1840s by Samuel MacKenzie Elliot, a prominent eye surgeon, activist, and abolitionist, who purchased property in the vicinity of Bard Avenue and Richmond Terrace in 1836. He was the first of many prominent abolitionists to arrive in Richmond County. His professional reputation brought him distinguished patients, and he attracted many like-minded progressive individuals to the neighborhood who decided to stay. Elliottville became an enclave for reformists, mostly New Englanders who were Unitarians, Republicans, and abolitionists. Residents included attorney, journalist, and abolitionist, Sydney Howard Gay, the progressive reform leader, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and George William Curtis. Elliottville became known as Livingston when the North Shore Branch of the Staten Island Railway established a station in 1886 on the Livingston homestead.<sup>3</sup> As the area continued to be developed, Livingston was subsumed by West New Brighton.

### The Curtis Family

George William Curtis and Anna Shaw were married in Richmond County (now Staten Island) in November 1856. A distinguished author, editor, essayist, and lecturer, at the time of their marriage the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray called George William Curtis “the cleverest and best and most gentlemen-like man in New York.”<sup>4</sup> Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1824, he moved to 27 Washington Place in Manhattan in 1839. During the mid-1840s, Curtis lived at Brook Farm, a utopian community in West Roxbury, outside Boston, and came into contact with members of the transcendental movement, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Anna Shaw was born in West Roxbury in 1838. Her parents, Francis George Shaw and Sarah Sturgis Shaw, sponsors of Brook Farm, moved to Staten Island in 1855. They settled in Elliottville (now West Brighton) to be close to Dr. Elliott, an eye surgeon who was treating Mrs. Shaw, and were founding members of the nearby Church of the Redeemer, now the Unitarian Church of Staten Island. Their children included Robert Gould Shaw, who died leading the first “negro” regiment in the Civil War, and reformer Josephine Shaw Lowell, the first woman in

New York City honored with a public memorial, a granite fountain (1913) in Bryant Park (a New York Scenic Landmark).

The George William and Anna Curtis house was built by Anna's parents for their daughter and son-in-law in 1859. They owned considerable property in the area and lived on the adjoining parcel, directly south. George and Anna had three children: Francis, Sarah, and Elizabeth. They lived comfortably, usually employing a cook, nurse, and other servants. 13 years his junior, Anna raised the children and helped her husband with his literary career. George William Curtis biographer, Edward Cary wrote:

. . . his home was always a haven where he constantly sought refuge and repose, and from which, refitted, reinforced, inspired with renewed confidence and courage, he set out to the "good wars" that invited him, and that to the gracious and noble lady who made that home is due no small share in his many and rich achievements.<sup>5</sup>

An extraordinarily prolific author, Curtis reportedly wrote more than 2,500 articles for *Harper's* magazine.<sup>6</sup> A progressive thinker and persuasive lecturer, he addressed major political issues of the day, such as slavery, women's suffrage, civil service reform, and the "public duty of educated men."<sup>7</sup> He was a founding trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870-89) and served as regent, vice chancellor, and chancellor of the University of the State of New York (1864-90). Curtis had many prominent friends and traveled extensively throughout his career, only retiring from the "lyceum circuit" in 1873.<sup>8</sup> From this time on, George and Anna spent much of the year on Staten Island, while continuing to summer at their farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts.

Curtis resided in this house for more than three decades, until his death in 1892.<sup>9</sup> A strong advocate for civil rights, he encouraged his wife to pursue "intellectual and public interests."<sup>10</sup> Anna was active in the Church of the Redeemer and served on the Board of Education, as well as on the Richmond County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Woman's Club of Staten Island.<sup>11</sup> Curtis High School (1902-04), the first secondary school on Staten Island and a New York City Landmark, was named for George Curtis. Several streets on Staten Island honor him, as well as Public School 19, the Curtis School. Anna, who died in 1923, lived in the house for nearly 75 years.<sup>12</sup> During her later years, she shared it with their daughter, Elizabeth Burill Shaw (1862-1914), who *The New York Times* described as "a prominent figure in the life of Staten Island . . . a strong advocate for woman suffrage."<sup>13</sup>

#### The Design of the George William and Anna Curtis House<sup>14</sup>

During the mid-19th century American rural architecture underwent a revolution as nationally-circulated journals and architectural handbooks rapidly began to introduce new ideas about planning and design to a broad public that displaced traditional building forms. Much of the credit for this change belongs to Andrew Jackson Downing, who through a series of essays in *The Horticulturalist*, a "journal of rural art and rural taste," which he edited, and in his influential architectural handbooks, including *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841), *Cottage Residences* (1842), and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), introduced English ideas on rural landscape design and architecture to the American public. Downing published numerous designs for cottages, farmhouses, and villas, featuring the work of Alexander Jackson Davis, John Notman, Gervase Wheeler, Richard Upjohn, and Calvert Vaux (the last became his business partner). These designs were largely in the Gothic Revival and

Italianate styles since Downing considered the picturesque qualities of these styles particularly suitable for country settings.

One of the most popular of the designs published by Downing was the design for “An Ornamental Farm House” (Design IV) in *Cottage Residences*.<sup>15</sup> It represents a symmetrically-planned two-and-one-half-story stone farm house that is three bays wide. The design includes a one-story full-length porch and side-gabled roof that features a center cross gable that is trimmed with vergeboards and a decorative pinnacle. This design served as inspiration to numerous architects, builders, and carpenters throughout the country since the overall form of the house remained relatively simple and traditional, while the gable provided a concession to fashion and served as a focus for modest ornament. The front facade of the Curtis House closely resembles this design in form. Like the design published in *Cottage Residences*, the Curtis House features a three-bay two-and-a-half-story house with a center cross gable and a one-story full-length porch. It is not known whether the Curtis house was directly based off of “An Ornamental Farm House;” however, George William Curtis was well acquainted with Andrew Jackson Downing and familiar with his work. In 1853, a series of Downing’s essays were published posthumously in a book titled *Rural Essays*. George William Curtis was the editor of the book, and he began the book with a lengthy memoir on Andrew Jackson Downing. In it, Curtis wrote about the time the two men spent together and acknowledged that at the time of their first meeting in 1846, he had read all of Downing’s books.

That the Curtis House is not an exact copy of the farmhouse featured in *Cottage Residences* is not unusual. Despite their influence, pattern-book designs, like Downing’s, were rarely followed to the letter by the carpenters and builders who typically constructed country houses; as historian Daniel Reiff has observed, it was understood that they would adapt pattern-book designs and details “to meet local needs and financial constraints.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, precise copies were the exception rather than the rule, and many carpenters and builders combined architectural features from a variety of sources.

Beyond the house’s columned porch and bracketed gables and window sills, the house features minimal ornament. Its simplicity and its similarities to the design of the farmhouse in *Cottage Residences* suggest that the house was probably designed by a local carpenter or builder as opposed to an experienced architect. Additionally, its six-over-six windows are unusual for an Italianate style house, which typically featured one- or two-pane glazing and narrower openings. The six-over-six configuration is reminiscent of earlier houses, particularly those in the Federal and Greek Revival styles.

The George William and Anna Curtis House is a fine example of a vernacular free-standing Italianate style country residence. Its form, which closely resembles the design for “An Ornamental Farmhouse” featured in Andrew Jackson Downing’s pattern book, *Cottage Residences*, provides evidence of the influence of pattern books and Downing’s work on American 19<sup>th</sup> century residential architecture.

### Subsequent History

Anna Curtis’ parents retained ownership of the house and property until 1870 when they transferred it to their daughter.<sup>17</sup> Anna Curtis occupied the house until her death in 1923, having outlived her husband by more than 30 years.<sup>18</sup> In 1925, Francis George Curtis, the son of George and Anna Curtis, sold most of the property with the exception of the house to Peter Larsen, and the property was subsequently subdivided.<sup>19</sup> Three years later in 1928, Francis George Curtis

also sold the house.<sup>20</sup> The house's current owners, who have owned the house since 1999, have undertaken an extensive restoration of the house's front facade.<sup>21</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Private Preservation Projects," Historic Restorations, George William Curtis House, <http://www.historic-restorations.com/projects-and-services/private>; Kathryn Carse, "Staten Island's House Tour," silive.com, June 9, 2014, accessed May 9, 2016, [http://www.silive.com/homegarden/index.ssf/2014/06/staten\\_islands\\_north\\_shores\\_tr.html](http://www.silive.com/homegarden/index.ssf/2014/06/staten_islands_north_shores_tr.html).

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1930), 253-254; Marjorie Johnson, "Livingston," *Encyclopedia of New York*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 687; Debbie-Ann E. Paige, "A Slow Burn: The Incendiary Politics of Race and Violence in Antislavery Conflict and the Effects on the Civil War Draft Riots in Richmond County, New York 1855-1865," MA Thesis, College of Staten Island of the City University of New York, 2012, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Minn, "History and Future of the North Shore Rail Line on Staten Island," Hunter College of the City University of New York, 4, [http://michaelminn.net/newyork/infrastructure/north\\_shore\\_railroad/north-shore-web.pdf](http://michaelminn.net/newyork/infrastructure/north_shore_railroad/north-shore-web.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted By Joan Waugh in *Unsentimental Reformer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Cary, *George William Curtis* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 103.

<sup>6</sup> William Winter, *George William Curtis: A Eulogy Delivered before the People of Staten Island, at Castleton, St. George*, February 24, 1893 (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 92.

<sup>7</sup> Title of oration delivered at the commencement of Union College on June 27, 1877, viewed at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hnur7q;view=1up;seq=9>.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Milne, *George William Curtis and The Genteel Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), 174.

<sup>9</sup> George W. Curtis's Funeral To-day," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1892, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted at <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/shaw.html>

<sup>11</sup> The society was founded in 1880, Curtis was a "charter" member.

<sup>12</sup> "Mrs. Anna Shaw Curtis," *The New York Times*, August 24, 1923, 11. The public school was named for George William Curtis in August 1892, shortly before his death.

<sup>13</sup> "Elizabeth Burrill Curtis," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1914.

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<sup>14</sup> Portions of this section are adapted from: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Edwards-Barton House* (LP-2093) (New York: City of New York, 2001), 3-4, prepared by Gale Harris; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *James W. and Lucy S. Elwell House* (LP-2215) (New York: City of New York, 2006), 6, prepared by Kathryn E. Horak. Additional sources include: A. J. Downing, *Rural Essays* (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1860), xi-lviii.

<sup>15</sup> A.J. Downing, *Cottage Residences* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1842), 88-93.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel D. Reiff, *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 89, 236.

<sup>18</sup> "Mrs. Anna Shaw Curtis."

<sup>19</sup> Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 605, 502.

<sup>20</sup> Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 661, 154.

<sup>21</sup> "Private Preservation Projects," Kathryn Carse.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the buildings and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that George William and Anna Curtis House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the George William and Anna Curtis House is an excellent example of a pattern-book-inspired Italianate style country residence and was the home of the notable reformist George William Curtis; that the house was built in Elliottville, an area that was developed in the 1840s by Samuel MacKenzie Elliot, a prominent eye surgeon, activist, and abolitionist, who attracted a group of notable like-minded reformists to the neighborhood; that the Curtises lived most of their lives together in the house at 234 Bard Avenue; that George William Curtis was a distinguished author, editor, essayist, and lecturer and that he addressed major political issues of the day, such as slavery, women's suffrage, and civil service reform; that Anna Curtis was active in local organizations and came from a like-minded family of reformists; that the house is a fine example of a vernacular free-standing Italianate style country residence; that the house, which shares similarities with the design for "An Ornamental Farm House" in Andrew Jackson Downing's pattern book, *Cottage Residences*, exemplifies the influence of pattern books and Downing's work on American 19<sup>th</sup> century residential architecture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the George William and Anna Curtis House, and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 138, Lot 166 as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

Frederick Bland, Wellington Chen, Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, Jeanne Lufty, Adi Shamir-Baron, Commissioners





Main facade of 234 Bard Avenue  
*Photo: Corinne Engelbert, 2016*



234 Bard Avenue, undated.  
*Photo: Courtesy of the Staten Island Historical Society*



Rear view of 234 Bard Avenue, undated.  
 Photo: Courtesy of Staten Island Museum

