

175 BELDEN STREET HOUSE, City Island, Borough of the Bronx. Built c.1880.
Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 5637, Lot 125.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 175 Belden Street House, City Island and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to September 11, 1979 (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were 2 speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Few domestic building types have experienced as much popularity and longevity in America as the picturesque cottage, a simple, small, inexpensive dwelling type developed during the mid-19th century. Intended for rural locations, cottage architecture is seldom found in urban areas, and the house at No. 175 Belden Street on City Island in the Bronx is one of only a few of the type known to exist in New York City. Its location on City Island, however, is not unexpected, as the house was constructed c. 1880 at a time when the island was a farming and maritime community, distinctly rural, and still part of the New York township of Pelham. Situated at the tip of the island with a superb view of Pelham Bay, the Belden Street house is one of the most noteworthy structures on City Island, distinguished by the jigsaw brackets, dormers, porches, and bays that typify the charming picturesque cottage mode.

The Picturesque Cottage

When architect Alexander Jackson Davis, who published a cottage design in his 1837 Rural Residences, introduced the type to this country a decade after it had first appeared in English journals, he planted the seeds of a long and healthy architectural tradition. The simple, functional cottage mode had taken firm hold by the 1840s, particularly in the northeast, and was to remain fashionable until the 1890s. Perhaps its most influential proponent was Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), an associate of Davis: A landscape architect, horticulturalist, self-taught architect, and prolific writer, Downing was one of the most authoritative American tastemakers. His popular books, A Treatise on the Theory and Practise of Landscape Gardening (1841) and Cottage Residences (1842) presented the cottage briefly. The type was more fully explored in his 1850 work, The Architecture of Country Houses

where he distinguished it from the farmhouse and villa:

...not only should the cottage look like a cottage, but it should avoid all pretension of what it cannot honestly and faithfully be. And as its object is first utility, and then beauty, the useful should never be sacrificed to the ornamental but the latter should be more obviously connected with, and grow out of the former, in a cottage than in the more elaborate dwelling.¹

The picturesque cottage's principal characteristics -- functional simplicity, convenient arrangement, and small size -- were the reason for its immense success. Here, for the first time, was a house type specifically designed to meet the needs of the average working-class American. Cheap to build and humble in aspirations, the cottage was destined to become a national house type, clearly identified with the ideals of democratic American society.²

The potential of the cottage type was recognized and exploited by Davis, Downing, and many others who published hundreds of architectural pattern books that had a tremendous impact on 19th-century American taste. Books such as Charles Dywer's The Economic Cottage Builder (1855), John Bullock's The American Cottage Builder (1854), and Downing's works, written for architects and local builders alike, boasted "homes for the People" and offered advice for simple living. Also included were building plans and recommendations for choosing the most economical building materials at hand.

The design of the Belden Street House was clearly inspired by these books. A prototype appears, for example, in Bicknell's Victorian Architecture published in 1878 by A.J. Bicknell (see illustration). As in Bicknell's illustration, the clapboard-sided, two-and-one-half-story house at 175 Belden Street shows a compact and economical design. The main body of the structure is tied into an intersecting north wing by means of a one-story porch on both sides of the house. These side porches with jigsaw brackets are a typical and essential part of the mode. The peaked dormers, decorative bargeboard marking the eaves, bay windows with bracketed shed roofs, crossed stick-work, corbeled brick chimneys, and imbricated slate roof are also typical, and closely resemble Bicknell's composition, which was a standard design.

A wide range of styles was considered appropriate for the cottage--there were "farm," "village," "Italian," "thatched," "rural," and "octagon" to name a few. Perhaps most popular was the Gothic, by nature picturesque, with its irregular shapes and high gables. The style was particularly suited to the romantic taste of the period. The high peaked gable characteristic of the Gothic Revival, gothic-arched windows, and jigsaw brackets and bargeboard, simply executed on the Belden Street house, often turned these cottages into gingerbread confections, while the combined use of wood with jigsaw trim earned the nickname of "carpenters' gothic." On a more theoretical level, the small porches, bay windows, and dormers associated with the type and used on the Belden Street house were intended to express the domestic purpose of the cottage -- good and simple living.

A lack of records makes exact documentation of the 175 Belden Street house difficult, but we can date it c. 1880 according to its style. It was built during City Island's heyday, at a time when the small island had developed from an early Indian settlement to a maritime community renowned for its thriving oyster business. Sailmaking and shipbuilding were also major enterprises. The first shipyard was established in 1862 by David Carrol, and one of the most famous is the Minneford Yard, which has produced in recent years a number of defenders of the America's Cup, a coveted sailing trophy.

The house is located on the southern tip of the island on Belden Street (originally Windmill Street) which was named for William Belden, a prominent financier who lived in the house that is now the Morris Yacht Club. The tip of the island, now Belden's Point, was previously known as Horton's Point, after George Washington Horton, who purchased 42 acres at that location in 1818.

Much of City Island's distinctive 19th-century architecture was built during the latter half of the century when the island's economy boomed. Many fine 19th-century houses remain today and combine with more contemporary buildings on the island to give the community an exceptional character. No. 175 Belden Street is one of the most notable houses on the island. As one of the few picturesque cottages to exist in the five boroughs, it is a special part of the city's architectural heritage.

FOOTNOTES

1. A.J. Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), p.44.
2. William H. Pierson, American Buildings and their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque, the Corporate and Early Gothic Styles (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1978), p. 391.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 175 Belden Street 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 175 Belden Street House is an exceptionally fine example of the picturesque cottage mode, which first became popular in America in the mid-19th century, that the house was constructed in around 1880 on City Island, the Bronx, when it was a bustling maritime and fishing community; that it reflects this suburban historical development within the city limits of New York and is thus a rare building type and even more rare survivor.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York; the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 175 Belden Street House, City Island Borough of The Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 5637, Lot 125, Borough of Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

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175 BELDEN STREET
City Island, The Bronx

Photo: Rachel Carley, New York City Landmarks
Preservation Commission

Built: c.1880