

33-37 BELAIR ROAD HOUSE, (Woodland Cottage), Borough of Staten Island.  
Built c.1845 and c.1900.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 2680, Lot 30.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 33-37 Belair Road House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The 33-37 Belair Road House is one of the few surviving picturesque Gothic Revival cottages that dates from the early period of Staten Island's suburban development. Constructed c.1844 by a developer as a rental residence known as Woodland Cottage, it was once one of the many Gothic Revival villas and cottages built in the east shore suburb of Clifton after the late 1830s. Although its architect is unknown, the cottage reflects the influence of Alexander Jackson Davis whose work includes a number of residences designed for Staten Island clients. Between 1858 and 1869, Woodland Cottage served as the rectory for St. John's Episcopal Church.

The original portion of the house is a cross-gabled, two-story section of clapboard. Its significant features include a prominent center chimney, steep gables ornamented with bargeboards, casement windows with diamond-shaped panes and label moldings, and a porch extending the width of the facade.

The gabled section at the western end of the house was added c.1900 by a later owner, the Staten Island builder, James Thompson. His work includes the exterior and interior carpentry of the second St. John's Church completed in 1871, a designated New York City Landmark. Although the addition repeats the Gothic Revival style bargeboard of the original structure, Queen Anne features such as the decoratively treated window sash reveal its later date. This addition is similar to the many turn-of-the-century residences in Clifton -- some of them built by Thompson -- which transformed a romantic suburb to the more densely settled neighborhood that exists today.

#### Staten Island's Early Suburban Development

The course of Staten Island's early history as a relatively isolated and sparsely settled community of farmers and fishermen was first altered in 1799 when the Port of New York Quarantine Station was relocated from Governor's Island to the north shore area that soon became known as Tompkinsville, the name of the small village that grew up around it. Regular steamboat ferry service between Tompkinsville and Whitehall in Manhattan was established in 1817, and by 1827 Staten Island's first summer resort hotel -- the Pavilion -- had been built on the hillside behind the Quarantine Station.

Staten Island's picturesque rural environment and its accessibility from lower Manhattan also made it a logical choice for the development of New York City's early suburbs. Wooded slopes, panoramic views of Upper New York Bay, and extensive shore frontage offered an ideal setting where "men engaged in active business" might "withdraw from the labor and anxiety of commerce to the quiet of their own families, unexposed to intrusion." Thus was New Brighton, the first of the Island's large, comprehensively planned suburbs, advertised in 1836.<sup>1</sup>

New Brighton was initiated by Thomas E. Davis, a successful and wealthy Manhattan land developer. By 1834 he had acquired a large tract of land extending westward from today's St. George Ferry Terminal to Sailors' Snug Harbor and constructed several Greek Revival houses along the Shore Road, the present Richmond Terrace. The potential of the area quickly attracted the attention of other investors, and they joined with Davis to form the New Brighton Association. Streets and building lots were laid out and an elaborate brochure promoting the new suburb prepared.

The depiction of the proposed development included in the brochure shows the hillside bounded by Hamilton and Westervelt Avenues occupied by a series of crescent streets lined by dwellings in a variety of medievalizing and classicizing styles. The western portion of the development was to retain a more wooded setting. There scattered rooftops poke up above the trees. Several large hotels and a number of bathing pavilions stand along the shore.

The proposed suburb of New Brighton soon had a competitor. By 1836 another group of New York City businessmen and real estate developers had purchased a number of farms lying between the Narrows and today's Vanderbilt Avenue. Like their New Brighton counterparts, they formed an organization -- the Staten Island Association -- established new streets, and published an elaborate brochure advertising the suburb of Clifton. Unfortunately, no copies of the twenty-four page pamphlet appear to have survived and our knowledge of the Association's composition and intentions is incomplete, but if similar to the New Brighton Association's promotional literature, the beauty of the east shore with its rising hills culminating in the cliffs at the Narrows and its views of both Upper and Lower New York Bays would have been extolled as a prime attraction.

Although a number of factors, including the Panic of 1837, determined that neither of the two suburbs evolved as quickly nor in the manner envisioned by their original developers, Blood's 1845 map of the north and east shores reveals that a substantial number of Manhattan merchants had already established their residences on Staten Island. Villas and cottages with names such as Woodbrook, Sweet Briar, Oak Hill, and Lake Cottage suggest that Staten Island was receptive to the romantic rural suburb advocated by the noted American architect, Alexander Jackson Davis, and his collaborator, architectural critic and landscape gardener, Andrew Jackson Downing.

In 1847, Downing's journal, The Horticulturist, noted that:

Staten Island is undoubtedly one of the most agreeable suburbs of New York. Its interior comprises many hundred acres of wooded surface, varied by hills, dells and glades, and affording delightful roads and drives, while its best portions offer many sites which command admirable views of the Ocean, the Narrows and the bay and harbor of New York.

We are not surprised, therefore, at the numberless rural improvements that are annually going on within its boundaries. There are some residences, on the island, highly remarkable in a landscape gardening and tasteful point of view, ... And there are now, dozens of smaller suburban cottages and villas, more neatly built and increasing in number every day.<sup>2</sup>

The Gothic Revival and Italianate residences illustrated on the borders of Staten Island maps dated 1850 and 1853 and shown dotting a picturesque landscape in an 1854 bird's eye view of Clifton from the Narrows confirm Downing's description.<sup>3</sup>

Their owners -- men such as William H. Aspinwall, Levi Cook, William B. Townsend, William H. Townsend and John Austen -- were prosperous and urbane Manhattan businessmen. The architects whom they selected to design their Staten Island homes were often the most eminent of the day. Work by Alexander Jackson Davis for a number of Staten Island clients has been documented.<sup>4</sup> James Renwick, Jr., Richard Upjohn, John Haviland and Calvin Pollard were among the other architects chosen by the island's new suburban residents.<sup>5</sup>

Downing's recommendation that "architectural beauty must be considered conjointly with the beauty of the landscape or situation" is one that was frequently followed in New Brighton and Clifton.<sup>6</sup> The choice hillside and shorefront sites were soon occupied by Gothic Revival and Italianate style residences. Horticulture and landscape gardening displaced agriculture. From a farming community there grew modern romantic suburbs on Staten Island that were illustrative of contemporary architectural theory and practice. Woodland Cottage at 33-37 Belair Road is among the handful of survivors dating from what is one of the most significant periods in the history of Staten Island's architecture.

#### Woodland Cottage

Although there were substantial residences with extensive grounds constructed in Clifton after 1840 for which the appellation "villa" was appropriate, there were also to be found many of the more modest dwellings or "cottages" mentioned in Downing's 1847 description of Staten Island. A number of these appear to have been built by small-scale developers for rental.<sup>7</sup> This seems to be the case of the cottage at 33-37 Belair Road.

The plot on which Woodland Cottage stands was once part of farmland that had belonged to a branch of the Simonson family since the 18th century. Farmland belonging to other branches of this large family originally occupied most of the island's east shore.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 1834 the parcel of land which included the lot that would be occupied by the 33-37 Belair Road House changed hands several times within the space of a few years as the transition to suburbia was indicated by a flurry of speculative land purchase for potential development.

In 1841 ownership of the parcel containing the lot of the present house, together with title to several other parcels, was transferred by Elutheros Comstock, a ship-builder from New York, to David Abbott Hayes, a counselor-at-law from Newark, New Jersey.<sup>9</sup> Hayes appears to have been one of the principals in the Staten Island Association, as were several of the other short-term owners who preceded him.<sup>10</sup>

The original cottage at 33-37 Belair Road was constructed c.1844, during the period of Hayes' ownership. While it is not mentioned in the title to the adjoining property given by Hayes to the Wardens and Vestry of St. John's Episcopal Church in 1844 for the land on which the original church building at the corner of New York Avenue (today's Bay Street) and Belair Road had been built in 1843, it does appear on Blood's 1845 map of the east and north shores of Staten Island where it is identified as Woodland Cottage.<sup>11</sup> In 1849 Hayes sold the cottage to Manhattan pottery merchant John Mayer.<sup>12</sup> In the deed recording the sale Hayes is again identified as a resident of Newark, New Jersey. Actual occupancy of the cottage by Hayes seems doubtful. The identity of the presumed renters of the cottage between 1844 and 1849 has not been determined.

Later additions to the original house are linked with its subsequent owners. John Mayer, the New York City merchant who acquired the house from David Abbott Hayes in 1849, appears to have continued the original owner's use of the property for rental purposes. Mayer's own residence, no longer standing, seems to have been the large dwelling he constructed c.1844 on the shorefront lot adjoining the contemporary McFarlane-Bredt House.<sup>13</sup> The one-bay wide addition on the west side of the original Woodland Cottage may have been constructed during the period of Mayer's ownership, or it may have been built by the next owner, St. John's Episcopal Church. The cottage, which had been acquired by the church in 1858, is identified as a rectory on Walling's 1859 map of Staten Island.<sup>14</sup>

The organization of St. John's Episcopal Church in 1843 mirrors the rapid development of the new suburb. Establishment of a church more convenient to Clifton than the mid-island St. Andrew's Episcopal Church at Richmondtown became possible. The roster of its vestry, wardens, and congregation includes the same names attached to the villas and cottages shown on Blood's 1845 map. Dedicated in 1844, the first church was a Gothic Revival building of wood located on Bay Street diagonally opposite the present stone Victorian Gothic structure, a designated New York City Landmark, completed in 1871 from the designs of Arthur D. Gilman. The earlier church at the northwest corner of Belair Road and Bay Street occupied the lot adjacent to Woodland Cottage. As seen in older photographs, it features an unusual stepped gable, tall facade windows, and an offset tower with a steep gable roof. Although it was not originally designed for use as a rectory, the style of Woodland Cottage made it a compatible companion to the original St. John's Church.

During the eleven-year period Woodland Cottage was owned by St. John's Episcopal Church (1858-69), the principal occupant appears to have been its most eminent rector the Rev. John C. Eccleston. His many years of service to the church began in 1856, and, except for a brief interval of service to other parishes between 1863 and 1867, continued until his retirement at age seventy in 1898. The present rectory to the south of the church was, like the church, designed by Arthur Gilman. It was completed in 1882. The apparent loss of early vestry minutes has made it impossible to determine either the reason for the sale of Woodland Cottage (perhaps the sale provided funds for the construction of the new church begun in 1869) or the location of the building in use as a rectory between 1869 and 1882.

James Thompson, a Staten Island carpenter and builder, acquired Woodland Cottage in 1869 and it remained in the possession of his heirs until 1948.<sup>15</sup> Thompson is identified as an architect and builder in the Building Department docket books instituted after Staten Island's consolidation with New York in 1898; this profession was continued by his sons. The Thompsons were also owners of a large lumber and building supply yard located in Stapleton. Although its style suggests a somewhat earlier date, the westernmost addition to the earlier house is first shown on a 1907 atlas.<sup>16</sup> It was probably designed and built about 1900 by James Thompson.

Thompson acquired a considerable amount of property in Clifton including the lot occupied by the original St. John's Church, additional land once owned by the church between Belair Road and St. John's Avenue, and the McFarlane-Bredt House. The row of picturesque houses fronting on Bay Street between Belair Road and St. John's Avenue, additional houses on Belair Road, and possibly the later portions of the McFarlane-Bredt House would appear attributable to Thompson. Docket book entries indicate a number of other houses in the vicinity that were designed and built by him. Clifton's 19th- and early 20th-century transition from a romantic suburb to the more densely settled neighborhood that survives today is owed, in part, to the contributions made by James Thompson.

Although no longer in use as a rectory after 1869, the history of Woodland Cottage remains linked with the history of St. John's Church. James Thompson was responsible for the exterior and interior carpentry of the church building completed in 1871. Parish records make special note of the church doors and the entry porch on the south side of the building. Thompson was also the builder of the parish hall or Mercer Memorial Chapel completed in 1886. A bronze plaque in that building installed by his children in 1912 is dedicated to his memory.

### Description

The original portion of the house as constructed by Hayes is a cross-gabled Gothic Revival structure of clapboard with a prominent center chimney. Although the architect is unknown, its general characteristics reflect the influence of the small suburban cottages designed by Alexander Jackson Davis. The steep center and end gables with wide eaves ornamented by sturdy bargeboards are typical features of his small cottage style. The facade is further emphasized by an oculus window. Casement windows with diamond-shaped panes of glass are topped by label moldings and flank the escutcheon placed at the second floor level. Diamond-shaped panes are also used for the first floor French windows which balance the main doorway located on the west side of the facade. Horizontally-set windows placed at either side of the wide, pointed-arch opening are filled with the type of diamond-shaped panes used in the other windows. The handsome, double-leaf main door with its upper and lower panels of thin, turned spindles fronting tall panes of glass almost suggests the transparency of a large church window. The broad porch extending across the facade features fluted and turned posts set on tall bases, and decorative scrollwork panels and brackets supporting the porch roof.

A later addition to the original structure is a slightly lower, one-bay wide clapboard section attached to the west side of the original house. Its peaked center gable and bargeboard in an inverted scallop pattern repeat the comparable features of the original house, although at a reduced scale. Casement windows with label moldings and diamond-shaped panes in the addition also duplicate the earlier forms.

A still later addition is attached to the west side of the one-bay wide section. It is a two-and-a-half story clapboard-covered structure placed gable end to the street. Repeating the Gothic Revival motif, the bargeboard adorns a wider, less steeply-pitched gable and is a more curvilinear version of the inverted scallop pattern used for the earlier section. The porch, designed as a mate to the porch of the original house continues along the west side of the addition where it supports a partially enclosed second-story porch. The porch posts are similar to those found on the original porch; however, spindlework lattice panels inserted between the posts have taken the place of the decorative scrollwork used earlier. The lattice work and the decorative enframement of the upper sash in the second floor and attic windows indicate the presence of Queen Anne and Eastlake stylistic influences in this turn-of-the-century addition.

The history of Woodland Cottage, which is closely linked with the history of St. John's Church, reflects the suburban development of 19th-century Clifton. Today it survives as a rare and well-preserved example of a Gothic Revival residence, with compatible additions, that characterizes the mid-19th century romantic architectural ideal.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. George A. Ward, Description of New Brighton on Staten Island Opposite the City of New York, (New York: New Brighton Association. 1836), p.6.
2. "Design for a Small Villa," The Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Taste. 1, (1847) 412.
3. Map of Staten Island or Richmond County, surveyed by J.C. Sydney, published by M. Dripp, 1850.  
Map of Staten Island or Richmond County, N.Y. surveyed, drawn and published by James Butler, C.E. and surveyor, 1853.  
Panorama of the Harbor of New York, Staten Island and the Narrows, 1854.
4. Metropolitan Museum of Art: collection includes plans and/or notes referring to work done by Alexander Jackson Davis for the following Staten Island clients: Smith Ely, William B. Townsend, Charles Carleton, William Emerson, Bunker, Wetmore, S.T. Jones, Hasbrouck. Avery Library, Columbia University: collection includes drawings for the Smith Ely and William Emerson houses. The much-altered house still standing on Hasbrouck Street may be the one seen in "Design for a Small Villa" cited above (f.n.2). It was designed by Davis "for a gentleman whose grounds are toward its (Staten Island's) southern part..."
5. See Architects: Architecture Collection: Staten Island Institute of Arts and Science, for documented works by Renwick, Upjohn, Haviland, Pollard and others for Staten Island clients.
6. Downing, A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844), p. 38.
7. The McFarlane-Bredt House in Clifton was constructed in the early 1840s as a rental residence. McFarlane also built a row of rental houses on the Shore Road, today's Richmond Terrace, in New Brighton during the same years. Other rental cottages in the vicinity of Woodland Cottage that survive include the row of much-altered small picturesque houses on Sylvaton Terrace. Additional research is required to establish the various patterns of development which created the early suburbs of New Brighton and Clifton between 1835 and 1860.
8. Shirley Zavin, et.al., Historic Structure Report: the Alice Austen House, 1979, pp. 50-52, discusses the history of Simonson holdings on the east shore of Staten Island.
9. Richmond County, Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Liber 8, p. 463. The purchase price of \$1.00 suggests a financial arrangement or relationship between Hayes and Comstock.
10. Ibid., Liber 7, p. 551. Lewis Lyman, the Secretary of the Staten Island Association sells other extensive holdings in Clifton to David Abbott Hayes for \$1.00, indicating some sort of partnership between them. Earlier short-term owners of the Woodland Cottage property include Moulton Bullock, New York City broker, James W. Otis, New York City merchant and Jonathan Prescott Hall, New York City attorney. All figure prominently in the many transfers of property along the entire east shore that occurred in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

11. It also appears on the Map of Lands at Clifton, Staten Island, The Property of David A. Hayes, Esq., filed April 14, 1849. Richmond County Clerk's Office, Map 59.
12. Conveyances of Deeds, Liber 18, p. 622.
13. See Map of New Brighton, Tompkinsville, Stapleton and Clifton, surveyed and drawn by C.H. Blood, 1845.
14. Conveyances of Deeds, Liber 43, p. 325. See also: Map of Staten Island or Richmond County from surveys under the direction of H.F. Walling, 1859.
15. Conveyances of Deeds, Liber 81, p. 626. Woodland Cottage and Thompson's many other Clifton properties were sold by his heirs in the late 1940s.
16. E. Robinson, Atlas of the Borough of Richmond County, City of New York, 1907.

#### 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 33-37 Belair Road House has 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 33-37 Belair Road House is one of the few picturesque Gothic Revival cottages surviving from the early period of Staten Island's suburban development; that its general characteristics reflect the influence of the small suburban cottages designed by the noted American architect Alexander Jackson Davis for many clients including a number of Staten Island patrons; that its significant features include a prominent center chimney, steep gables ornamented with bargeboards, casement windows with diamond-shaped panes and label moldings, and a broad porch; that it was constructed within the context of the romantic suburban development popularized by the eminent architectural critic and landscape gardener, Andrew Jackson Downing; and that its history is closely associated with the history of St. John's Church, serving as its rectory between 1858 and 1869; that the additions made by a later owner, builder/architect James Thompson, harmonize beautifully with the original structure; and that today it survives as an important reminder of the 19th-century suburb of Clifton.

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 33-37 Belair Road House, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 2680, Lot 30, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo Credit:  
David Bishop

33-37 BELAIR ROAD HOUSE  
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