

ERNEST FLAGG'S TODT HILL COTTAGES: BOWCOT, 95 West Entry Road, Borough of Staten Island. Built 1916-18, architect Ernest Flagg

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 891, Lot 99.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Bowcot and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speaker in opposition to designation. A letter has been received in support of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Completed in 1918, Bowcot is the first of several small stone cottages built by Ernest Flagg on the grounds of his Todt Hill estate. Employing the architect's inventive cost-saving design and construction techniques, Bowcot demonstrates Flagg's conviction that economy and good design are not mutually exclusive. Flagg's Todt Hill cottages embody his pioneering vision of affordable middle-class housing which could fulfill the aspirations of a broad segment of the nation's population.

Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Estate

Stone Court, the country estate of the noted American architect Ernest Flagg, is located on Todt Hill, part of the central ridge of serpentine rock which bisects the northern half of Staten Island. Flagg's imposing Colonial Revival style residence, several outbuildings and the nearby stone cottages he constructed on the grounds of his estate form a harmonious ensemble which exemplifies the architect's distinctive interpretation of Beaux-Arts inspired design principles as well as his life-long commitment to building reform.

Born in Brooklyn in 1857, Flagg was a member of the first generation of American architects shaped by the rigorous training programs of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Returning to this country in the 1880s and 1890s, Flagg and his contemporaries were imbued with an awareness of an architectural beauty governed by the constant principles of correct design discovered by the ancients and recovered by the architects of the Renaissance. Flagg's career, initiated by his competition-winning design of 1892 for St. Luke's Hospital on Morningside Heights, has been

characterized as one which embraced seemingly disparate projects ranging from imposing residences for affluent clients and large institutional complexes to workers' housing. These were but the outward manifestations of an architectural sensibility which sought always to mediate the general polarities implied by the terms "art" and "science." Flagg noted, for instance, that the entire design of St. Luke's Hospital, from its plan to the placement of ornamental elements, was determined by his employment of a modular unit of measure, a methodology inspired by his analysis of Greek architecture and repeated in his subsequent designs such as those for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1894-1898) and the Naval Academy at Annapolis (1897-1899).¹ Flagg also recorded that, "Even for tenements it has worked well and plans for several large groups of model fireproof tenements (N.Y. Fireproof Model Tenements, 1899-1900) were made this way."²

Flagg was introduced to Staten Island by its first Borough President George Cromwell and in 1898 Flagg purchased a lot adjacent to Cromwell's Todt Hill property. Fronting on Prospect Place (today's Flagg Place), it offered spectacular views of the Lower New York Bay and the Atlantic Highlands. Set upon a large terrace defined by rubblestone walls and occupying the most elevated portion of his property, Flagg's residence was a substantial structure of whitewashed fieldstone and shingles. The construction material and the gambrel roof alluded to the local Colonial building tradition which Flagg defined as French Huguenot. Numerous permutations of the colonial tradition were introduced by Flagg; they include a vastly enlarged scale, massive chimneys rising above the eaves on the front and rear elevations, and a circular balustraded observation deck which, straddling the roof ridge and enframed by the chimneys, marked the central axis bisecting the house and its grounds. Subsequent additions to the residence, the siting of outbuildings and the design of the landscape were all undertaken in reference to this axis. In addition to demonstrating Flagg's individualized Beaux-Arts-derived aesthetic, the estate also reveals, from its inception, the architect's interest in building technology. The chimneys, for example, are topped by distinctive curved ventilator caps which were painted black; intended to improve the efficiency of the heating system, the curved ventilator cap became one of the hallmarks of his Todt Hill designs. Continuing change, constant elaboration and ongoing experimentation are intrinsic to the history of Flagg's Todt Hill estate; the series of small stone cottages he constructed beginning in 1916 may in some respects be regarded as the culmination of the building program initiated in 1898.

As a young man Flagg had been involved in land and building speculation with his father and brother in the 1870s and 1880s. It was an experience which surely played a formative role in shaping Flagg's visionary development scheme for his Staten Island properties. Just after the turn of the century Flagg began buying additional tracts of land on Todt Hill. By 1907 he had acquired approximately 70 acres in the vicinity of his original purchase and in 1909 he established the Flagg Estate Company. The total of 200 acres Flagg owned by 1918 extended southwestward from West Entry Road to the far side of Todt Hill Road where his extensive holdings included much of what is today the Richmond County Country Club golf course.

Concurrently, Flagg was also involved in a number of projects

entailing additions to his residence and its immediate grounds. The residence gained added grandeur with the construction of a wing on the southwestern side which balanced the earlier wing opposite. A second level was added to the facade porch; its colonnade repeated the forms of the newly elaborated colonnade below. The terrace platform was extended and the landscaping formalized. Low fieldstone wings were added to the rear of his residence, a new gardener's residence was constructed in 1908, and the earlier gardener's residence on Flagg Place was subsequently enlarged and converted to a gatehouse. Although conventional rubblestone construction was used for the smaller structures, their scale and design elements predict the architect's experimental cottages. Foreshadowing Bowcot, for example, the new gardener's residence abutted and incorporated a portion of an existing stone retaining wall.

Small Houses: Their Economic Design & Construction

Flagg's new additions to his residence de-emphasized its Colonial Revival character; so too did his contemporary removal of whitewash from much of the estate's rubblestone construction. Revelation of Stone Court's stone represented far more than a cosmetic change. Stone construction lay at the heart of his ambitious development plan, the "Flagg Ridge Estate of Ernest Flagg at Dongan Hills, Staten Island," outlined in his book Small Houses: Their Economic Design and Construction published in 1922. Drawing upon prototypes of greater antiquity than those provided by the local Colonial building tradition, Flagg envisioned his Todt Hill lands populated by many small stone houses, an ensemble which would evoke the ancient Anglo-French or Norman villages of England and France. Stone, described by Flagg as "king of building materials," was selected for very practical reasons as well. The cost of wood increased during the post-World-War-I period due to a diminishing supply. Reduced combustibility was another benefit of stone construction.

By his use of an earlier spelling of the family name, Flagg conferred ancestral and manorial character upon his proposed development, associations perhaps related to the concomitant aggrandizement of his residence and its grounds. The Flagg Ridge Estate was conceived as more than a picturesque enclave for the privileged however. It would also demonstrate that Flagg's inventive cost-saving but improved construction methods could make the American dream of a single-family house attainable by a broadened segment of the country's population. Affordability was not to be the altar upon which good design was sacrificed. On the contrary, as Flagg pointed out in his introduction to Small Houses, "... the theory for the design of these houses is that the most economical way of obtaining good results is to apply the greater fundamental principles of art and depend upon them for beauty rather than upon the use either of applied ornament or more expensive materials..."³

Economy was to be achieved by a host of means which Flagg divided into five general categories. Economical plan preparation entailed the use of a modular system. Subdivisions of a three-foot nine-inch modular unit chosen for its relationship to standard lengths of building materials corresponded to the grid of specially prepared graph paper.⁴ Economy was also obtained either through the utilization of under-used spaces or their elimination. Attics, for example, were enlarged through the use of tall, wide-spreading

roofs and rendered habitable by the introduction of ridge-line dormers which provided ample light and controllable ventilation. Hallways and corridors were abandoned while frequently wasted odd spaces were provided with lockers and cupboards. Reduction of the construction materials required was another area in which costs could be lowered. Wall heights, for instance, diminished as a result of the inhabitable attic story. Foundations shrank and cellars were eliminated by the damp-proofing methods introduced by Flagg. The architect's ingenious method of partition-wall construction -- plaster applied to a jute or burlap screen -- made studs and lath unnecessary. The much thinner (and fire-proof) walls which resulted also took up less space. Trim, baseboards and molding were dispensed with.

Flagg's fourth method of economizing entailed decreasing labor costs. A method of concrete wall-construction Flagg called "mosaic rubble" was one of the principal means of accomplishing this goal since it eliminated the need for skilled workmen. Flagg devised a system of reusable formwork consisting of uprights and cross-bars on foundation sleepers. These formed a trough into which stones could be placed -- their flat sides flush with the outer face of the wall -- to form a mosaic pattern which evoked conventional rubblestone construction. Concrete was poured around the stones to form a backing. The formwork was subsequently reassembled at a higher point and the process repeated. When the wall was completed only face-pointing was required. Lastly Flagg cites a number of "more economical devices, materials and methods" which range from construction details -- for these Flagg produced many patented designs -- to siting. Structures which conformed to the terrain, for example, eliminated the cost of extensive excavation and grading while adopting the European tradition of a roadside location represented an economical use of the land.

Bowcot

Bowcott, begun in the winter of 1916-17, was the first of the experimental stone cottages Flagg constructed on the grounds of his estate. As Flagg observed in Small Houses it is a paradigm of economical siting.⁵ Earlier rubblestone retaining walls extended along the northwestern edge of Flagg Place for much of its length. At East Entry and West Entry Roads the walls turned a short distance northwestward to form entry-gates for the carriage-drive leading to the Cromwell property, today's Richmond Country Club.⁶ The rear elevation of Bowcot was constructed atop the curved entry-gate wall lying on the southwestern side of West Entry Road. Flagg observed that ". . . as the wall bends with the road, the house bends too . . ." Thus Bowcot received its name.

Flagg also noted the fact that, "Back of the wall the land rises and the house accommodates itself to the slope." Beyond the principal facade this grassy tree-and-shubbery-dotted incline continues its relatively steep rise toward the northwest. Viewed from this direction, Bowcot appears to nestle into the slope and into its landscaped setting as well. Although Bowcot's rear elevation forms the boundary of a public thoroughfare, the garden setting it faces is an intimate, very private world. Flagg was understandably well-please with the siting. His description in Small Houses concludes that Bowcot ". . . has the appearance of belonging to its site which one often sees in the old buildings of Europe. Nor is this

strange for it was planned on the spot and fitted to the site. The machine-made air, so often characteristic of houses designed with reference to no particular site, and capable of being placed almost anywhere is here entirely missing. Instead of which the building has about it a certain individuality which seems to belong with the site and to be at home with its surroundings." This concordance between structure and topography is one of the most significant aspects of Bowcot's design.

Description

Since the four-bay-wide main section of the house, described by Flagg as an irregular rectangle, incorporates a portion of the earlier retaining wall, a basement story resulted; it may have been used originally for a kitchen. The principal story is taken up by the living and dining rooms and the attic by several bedrooms and a sitting room. A large one-story ell at the west corner of the main section provided additional bedroom space. From the spacious veranda, (now glassed in) inserted in the angle formed by the ell and the southwestern side of the main house, panoramic water views may be enjoyed. A nearly square, enclosed service-yard, formed in part by the existing retaining wall, was constructed at the opposite end of the main house. In the late 1920s Flagg added a lower one-and-a-half story attached garage thereby eliminating much of the courtyard space and the northeastern enclosing wall. The kitchen was transferred to the main story of this structure.

Bowcot marks Flagg's introductory use of mosaic rubble for domestic architecture.⁷ The stone employed is the light-green serpentine or soapstone taken from the quarry Flagg had established on the grounds of his estate.⁸ Rose-colored face-pointing mortar provides a pleasing contrast with the stone. Although the mosaic-rubble surface is less textural than the earlier retaining wall, Bowcot demonstrates Flagg's goal of an economical simulacrum for conventional rubble-stone masonry was achievable. Bowcot's new construction harmonizes with the old. Economy was also achieved by Flagg's inventive and simple method of corner construction, best observed in the garage addition. To eliminate stones requiring two worked faces, Flagg employed quoins consisting of stacked concrete-blocks with large vertical holes. Reinforcing rods were inserted through the stack and the hole filled with concrete. It has been observed that Flagg's introduction of this technique pre-dates the general usage of concrete-block by some twenty years.⁹

In order to create "beauty," Flagg pointed out that designers constrained by economic considerations needed to depend "almost entirely upon pleasing outline."¹⁰ He regarded dormers, chimneys and gables as particularly important contributors to the desired effect of "picturesqueness and interest." Bowcot is an excellent demonstration of this precept. It is undeniably the most picturesque of Flagg's Todt Hill cottages. The rising terrain, the higher elevation of the ell section and a relatively intricate plan have yielded a lively composition of contrasting and juxtaposed masonry-defined volumes and planes for all elevations. Each is different. On the northeastern elevation, for example, the off-set gable-wall of the garage addition contrasts with the taller gable-wall of the main section; the curved retaining wall links and partially encloses the two sections. This ensemble, in turn, contrasts

with the ell section on the southwestern side of the house. Roof treatment emphasizes and elaborates the composition.

Because they are wide-spreading to accommodate a living story and rise above walls which are very low, as on the northwestern elevation of the ell, or relatively low it compared with the conventional proportional relationship of these elements, roof slopes form a prominent and integral part of the design. This European-derived evocation of shelter is an important contributor to the air of domesticity Flagg sought to convey.¹¹ The original covering was rolled-roofing secured by a special fastening system patented by Flagg. The later slate roofing has been replaced by the existing asphalt shingles, a roofing material Flagg specifically avoided.¹² Rafter ends rest on wood sills and are slightly curved to form bell-cast eaves. The large brick end-chimneys on all original sections are not stuccoed; breaking the gable peaks, they are terminated by the distinctive curved ventilator cap Flagg introduced at his own residence.

The roof design is further enlivened by several dormer types. Large gabled dormers rise above the eaves on the front and rear slopes of the main section roof; their height and size is such that, when viewed in relation to the gable-wall, they almost suggest an intersecting gable roof rather than dormers. Gabled dormers which break the eaves appear on the garage and ell. Although the ridge-line dormers have been removed from the main section and ell, two remain on the garage. There is a large pyramidal roofed dormer on the southeastern slope of the ell roof.

Variety in dormer types is matched by window treatment. Openings are of several different sizes. Small square windows at the basement and end-wall attic level of the main section contrast with the generously scaled openings of its principal story. In comparison, the openings used on the southwestern wall of the ell seem quite narrow. Sash types vary as well. Ridge dormers employ double tiltable sash; the inner unit is attached at the lower sill and the outer at the top. Economy and convenience were gained by Flagg's rejection of double-hung sash in favor of small-paned casement-type windows for the larger openings. Casements not only admitted more air but are easier to wash since they swing inward. Setting the frames flush with the outer wall plane eliminated the need for stone sills and reveals. Today metal-frame storm-windows cover most openings and partially obscure the original frames and sash from view.

Bowcot's principal entry is on the northwestern elevation and occupies the second main section bay from the northeast. It is reached by a flight of stone steps leading up from the service courtyard and by a winding pathway from West Entry Road. The arched door opening is enframed by a portico consisting of a gable roof carried on thin columnar supports. The eave soffits are adorned with mutules ornamented with guttae, a motif which was perhaps intended as an acknowledgement of the classical Greek source Flagg claimed as the inspiration for this use of modular measure.

The motif of the arched door-opening is repeated for the garage entrance. The lunette portion of the opening is pierced by a large rectangular window; a molding extends along the base of the lunette. The door opening is emphasized by deep reveals; the panelled garage doors appear to be relatively modern.

In 1986 a large one-story concrete-stuccoed cinderblock extension was constructed thus obscuring the southwestern elevation of the ell section. One of the two windows of this elevation was converted to a door opening; the centrally located fireplace was opened up through the wall and provided with a masonry surround attached to the former exterior wall.

The addition utilizes the basic structural elements Flagg employed for the original building -- a wide, steeply pitched gable roof, a low rear wall, a ridge dormer and casement windows (fabricated in metal rather than wood) topped by gabled pediments. The ridgeline of the addition rises several feet higher than that of the ell and is not aligned with it, a result of the addition's greater depth. The height of the ridge line also obscures the lower portion of the tall chimney rising from the original structure.

The concrete-stucco wall finish of the addition is clearly differentiated from the original masonry. Scoring provides, however, a dimmed reflection of Flagg's mosaic rubble construction technique.

A metal frame greenhouse takes up approximately one-half of the southeastern elevation of the addition. Since the greenhouse abuts and projects slightly into the area occupied by the glassed in veranda on the southeastern elevation of the original house, some minor adjustments at the point of juncture were necessary.

Conclusion

Although it is a small structure, Bowcot's design embodies Flagg's central aesthetic theories. Flagg considered his Todt Hill cottages to be an integral part of his oeuvre, of no less importance, for example, than his most famous design, the Singer Tower, the world's tallest building when completed in 1911. As Flagg recorded in Small Houses, "It may seem to some that the steel frame has little to do with small houses. This may be true of the frame itself but not of the methods of design applicable to it. These methods apply to every artistic construction whether steel frame or otherwise. . . . The idea that it requires one kind of skill to deal successfully with the design of the tall building and another with the small house is fallacious; both alike are architectural problems, and in both alike the immutable laws of right design govern." ¹³ Many elements contribute to Bowcot's undeniable beauty but primary among them, in Flagg's view, was the modular measure which determined its design and assured a harmonious relationship between all its parts.

The enabling technology exemplified by Bowcot played an influential role in the development of American domestic architecture through the 1920s and 1930s. Flagg's ideas were widely disseminated through his articles in such journals as Country Life and McCall's Magazine. Flagg's methods of economical stone construction and modular design were also taken up and popularized by other architects. Harold Carey's Build a Some--Save a Third, published in 1924, and Frazier Forman Peters' Houses of Stone (1933) brought national attention to Flagg's ideas. ¹⁴ Flagg's legacy, however, as represented by Wallcot still endures. By promoting the concept of domestic architecture which is responsive to nature (Flagg's stone cottages have recently been cited as early examples of passive solar design

15) and respectful of the land, an architecture which did not regard good design and economical construction as mutually exclusive, Flagg articulated goals which retain their validity for contemporary residential design.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Ernest Flagg, Small Houses: their Economic Design and Construction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.9.
4. Mardges Bacon, Ernest Flagg: Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer (New York: The Architectural History Foundation and Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1986) pp. 270-71.
5. Small Houses, pp. 145-146. Bowcot is discussed and illustrated as House No. 50; see also photographs No. 21, p. 42 and No. 35, p. 115.
6. The Richmond County Country Club occupies the c.1860 Meyer-Alexander mansion later purchased by George Cromwell. The configuration of East and West Entry Road is related to the carriage drive which led to this imposing Italianate style residence. The Flagg Place retaining walls which front this property may have been constructed c. 1860 as well.
7. Experimentation with the mosaic rubble technique probably preceded its use for Bowcot. It is employed for some sections of the retaining walls which enclose the rear portion of Flagg's house lot. In addition, Flagg constructed a large workshop and storage shed of mosaic rubble c. 1916 (demolished after 1947) a short distance southwest of his house-lot swimming pool.
8. The precise location of this quarry has not been established.
9. Daniel A. Levy, "Bow-cot and the Honeymoon Cottage: Two Experimental Stone Houses by New York Architect Ernest Flagg," Fine Homebuilding, No. 5 (October/November, 1981), p. 32.
10. Small Houses, p. 97
11. Ibid., p. 96. Flagg was deeply concerned with how "the very essence of the idea of home" might be conveyed. Reduced height and conformity to the topography were his principal means. He goes on to note that, "A low building, hugging tight, as it were to Mother Earth almost always has about it an air of comfort and a suggestion of shelter . . . The building which seems to be indigenous to the soil bears about it a stamp of permanence, suggestive of the homestead; a structure rooted in the soil, so to speak, and appropriate to long continuance of family life."
12. Levy, p. 30, cites Flagg's comment regarding asphalt roof shingles as follows: "... simply funny, for vertical slits are cut, apparently for the pleasure of wasting money to repair the damage done, as they make three layers necessary where one would do."
13. Flagg, p. 83

14. Mardges Bacon, Testimony Given at the Landmarks Preservation Commission Public Hearing on October 12, 1982, pp. 9-10.
15. Ibid, p. 7.

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 Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Bowcot 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, Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Bowcot was the first of several innovative stone cottages built by the noted American architect Ernest Flagg on the grounds of his Todt Hill estate; that Bowcot employs the experimental cost-saving design and construction techniques developed by Flagg with the goal of making affordable housing available to a broad segment of the nation's population; that by its use of modular design Wallcot exemplifies Flagg's Beaux-Arts derived aesthetic principles; that Bowcot demonstrates Flagg's conviction that economical construction does not preclude good design; that Bowcot's sensitive siting which respects the existing topography is exemplary; that because it incorporates features responsive to changing climatic conditions, Bowcot represents a pioneering example of passive solar design; and that Bowcot embodies goals which retain their validity for contemporary residential design.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Bowcot, 95 West Entry Road, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 891, Lot 99 Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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Built: 1916-1918
Architect: Ernest Flagg

BOWCOT
95 West Entry Road
Staten Island

Photo Credit: Carl Forster
1987