

JOHN KING VANDERBILT HOUSE, 1197 Clove Road, Borough of Staten Island
Built c. 1836; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 246, Lot 56.

On September 29, 1987, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the John King Vanderbilt House and proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Fourteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Three representatives of the owner spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support for this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Constructed at a time when Staten Island was rapidly evolving from an isolated rural area to a community populated by new institutions and their structures, suburban developments, and growing villages, the John King Vanderbilt House is a telling survivor of this transitional period. A Manhattan grocer who became active in real estate transactions, Vanderbilt joined the growing influx of newcomers to Staten Island in 1825 where his Vanderbilt ancestors had settled in the 18th century. He brought with him the extended family which had been established in 1819 by the marriage of his stepdaughter Maria Flock to Abraham Vredenburg (Dorothy Valentine Smith's great-grandparents). The Vanderbilt and Vredenburg families lived in close proximity on the Corson farm which was acquired by Vanderbilt in 1832.

Constructed c. 1836, the Vanderbilt House illustrates how the Greek Revival style, which had been adopted for contemporary institutional and residential structures on the island, modified and incorporated existing building traditions. Less ostentatious than the local versions of temple-fronted houses, the Vanderbilt House is more imposing than the one-and-a-half story rural houses which demonstrated modernity by their simple neo-classical doorways. The distinguishing features of the more urbane Vanderbilt House include its imposing two-and-a-half story height, Greek Revival inspired entranceway, facade-wide porch and twin end-wall chimneys. It is a simple but stately house built for a prosperous man who, though listed as a farmer in census records, was actively involved in the purchase and sale of island property.

Between 1871, the date of John King Vanderbilt's death, and 1908, the house was owned and/or occupied by members of the Vanderbilt and Vredenburg families. It returned to family ownership in 1955 when it was purchased and restored by Dorothy Valentine Smith. One of the few surviving

structures on Staten Island associated with early Vanderbilt history, it provides tangible evidence of Miss Smith's lifelong interest in the island's history and the buildings which embody it.

John King Vanderbilt and his Residence

A member of the large family descended from Jacob Vanderbilt who settled on Staten Island c. 1718, John King Vanderbilt's branch has a far more obscure history than that of the branch which produced his first cousin, Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt and the Commodore's no less famous descendants. Information derived from census records, business directories, deeds, and wills, reveals that John King Vanderbilt's father, Oliver Vanderbilt, had at some point moved from Staten Island to Manhattan where he established a boot and shoe manufactory; he was apparently also involved in construction and banking.¹ His son John King Vanderbilt was born in 1781. By 1816 John King Vanderbilt is listed in city directories as a grocer; his shop and home were located on William Street. An 1825 directory indicates his grocery had been moved to the corner of Vesey and Church Streets. John King Vanderbilt was also involved in the acquisition and sale of real estate located on the outskirts of the growing city. Married in 1811 to Amy Osborn Flock, a widow with two young children, Maria and John, and considerably older than he, John King Vanderbilt became the father of two daughters, Sarah (b. 1812) and Mary (b. 1815). In 1819 his stepdaughter Maria Flock married Abraham Valentine Vredenburg; they were to parent ten children. What might be described as John King Vanderbilt's extended family came into being with this marriage; thereafter Abraham Vredenburg and his family lived either with or in close proximity to John King Vanderbilt.

The reasons underlying the decision made by John King Vanderbilt in 1825 to purchase a large Staten Island farm in the area now called South Beach and move there with his extended family are not known.²

Although the 1830s census and all subsequent census records list John King Vanderbilt's occupation as "farmer" or "agriculture," it is clear that he was consistently involved in the acquisition and disposition of real estate. In 1831 he acquired another large property, part of the Crusier homestead lands, on today's Richmond Terrace between the present Bement and Pelton Avenues. Here too he seems to have built a residence.

Until 1930 when it was demolished for the opening of Beverly Avenue, the Corson family homestead -- a typical example of the one-and-a-half story stone and wood farmhouses built on Staten Island in the 18th century -- stood on the eighty acres of land purchased in 1832 by John King Vanderbilt from relatives of the late Richard C. Corson.³ The Vredenburg family moved into the old farmhouse which John King Vanderbilt apparently renovated by adding a porch and increasing the height of the roof.⁴ Vanderbilt's own house, constructed c. 1836 a short distance southeast of the Corson house, is a simple yet stately structure which for nearly a hundred years stood in contrast to the earlier building that had been constructed at a time when Staten Island was a relatively isolated, sparsely settled rural community populated primarily by farmers, fishermen and many who plied both trades.⁵ As one of the dwindling number of structures that survive from the transitional early 19th-century period

when Staten Island was undergoing institutional relocation, urbanization and suburbanization, the Vanderbilt House helps to illustrate Staten Island's history and architectural development.

John King Vanderbilt's residence is part of the broad and changing design spectrum which appeared on Staten Island as it emerged from rural isolation. A major component of that spectrum consisted of the imposing late Federal and Greek Revival style buildings constructed during the 1820s and 1830s for the three large institutions new to Staten Island -- the Quarantine Station, Seaman's Retreat, and Sailors' Snug Harbor. The appearance of high-style designs in institutional architecture was accompanied by parallel developments in residential architecture. The colonnaded "Marble House" begun by Daniel D. Tompkins as a residence for his daughter in 1821 was the first of the monumental Greek Revival style mansions that would be built on Staten Island. The nearby row of temple-fronted residences that sprang up along the shorefront between today's Hamilton Avenue and Sailors' Snug Harbor in the 1830s⁶ represented the beginning phases of an ideal suburb planned and promoted by the New Brighton Association, one intended to attract the city's wealthy merchant class.⁷

The reflection of Staten Island's new classical architecture as translated by the local building tradition reveals a variety of responses. The Greek Revival style colonnade, for example, was grafted to an ubiquitous feature of Staten Island's colonial period dwellings, the "spring eave," a flared continuation of the front roof slope which, supported by posts, provided a deep porch. The resulting two-story colonnaded porch (some also included a porch floor at the second level), the local equivalent of a temple-fronted building, proliferated in all parts of the island in the 1830s and 1840s. The c. 1835 house at 364 Van Duzer Street, a designated New York City Landmark, is representative of the type.

Providing a contrast to these relatively ostentatious residences were the diminutive, one-and-a-half story houses still linked by their scale to much of Staten Island's earlier rural architecture which demonstrated their modernity with simple classical doorways. A one-story porch with simple posts was another characteristic feature. This type was especially common in the southern, more rural, sections of the island. The center section of the Abraham J. Wood House at 5910 Amboy Road, a designated New York City Landmark, is a characteristic example.

The John King Vanderbilt House might be described as occupying an intermediate position between the two house types. It shares with the smaller dwellings the simplified Greek Revival inspired entranceway and the facade-wide porch; the fascia board panelling between the eave brackets, however, is a minor but distinguishing detail. While the kitchen wing suggests the proportions of the one-and-a-half story houses, the overall scale of the Vanderbilt House -- one of its most significant aspects -- actually exceeds that of the colonnaded type represented by the 364 Duzer Street House. The enlarged scale of the Vanderbilt House is a product of its depth -- two rooms rather than one -- and the much greater height of its attic story.

In form and scale, the Vanderbilt House seems to draw less from the local rural tradition than do the Van Duzer Street and Wood House types. The more imposing late Federal style houses such as the c. 1821 former rectory of St. Andrew's Church, a designated New York City Landmark (there were but a few houses of this type built on Staten Island) would appear to be a more influential predecessor. The former rectory, now known as the Moore-McMillen House, employs a gambrel roof but otherwise its plan and elevation are similar to those of the Vanderbilt House as are the twin brick chimneys located on the elevation opposite the side-hall elevation. The lower portions of the chimney stacks are exposed in both houses.

The three-bay-wide side-hall plan sited with the short side to the street, evidence of a more urban house type, is a design common to all of the houses mentioned above; it contrasts with the more rural design exemplified by the Corson farm house with its longitudinal axis aligned with the street and center hall/entrance plan. In the Vanderbilt house, the kitchen wing was tucked out of sight to the rear of the main house and lateral extensions were never introduced.⁸

By the 1830s dwellings of the type represented by the Vanderbilt House were attainable by an enlarged segment of the island's population, the emergent middle class comprised primarily of local businessmen. A considerable number of similar houses must once have existed. Two comparable survivors are located at Richmondtown; both are designated New York City Landmarks and both stand on their original sites near the Greek Revival style Third County Courthouse constructed in 1837. The Stephens House was built c. 1838-40; the owner's grocery store, originally attached to the rear elevation, was reproduced in a 1964 restoration. The Bennett House, constructed in 1839, has a full-story basement used originally as a bakery; beginning in the 1840s and for many years thereafter John H. Bennett, a prosperous shipping merchant, was the owner. While there are a number of differences between the three houses, their major features -- plan, elevation and simple Greek Revival-inspired doorways -- are the same.⁹ Although the John King Vanderbilt House was built in a more bucolic location, the double appearance of the type in the rapidly growing village of Richmondtown also suggests its suitability to a more urban setting.

A relatively prosperous man, John King Vanderbilt did not choose a grand house; the exterior is modest, but the interior plan is spacious. The house seems to accord with what can be learned of his life, one in which devotion to a private world surpassed the need for public display. The needs of both his own and extended family consistently engaged him. The South Beach farm, for example, was passed on to his stepson John Flock (known later as John Flake) in 1835. His stepgranddaughter, Cornelia Vredenburg, was raised in his house. His daughters Sarah and Mary received substantial inheritances and his own house was given to his stepdaughter Maria Vredenburg. Not actively involved in the island's political or religious life, he nevertheless gained, as his obituary noted, the deep respect of his fellow citizens who had always obtained from him the best of advice.¹⁰

Later history and ownership of the Vanderbilt House

Under the terms of his will, probated in 1871, John King Vanderbilt left the unsold portions of the former Corson farm to his step-daughter Maria Flock Vredenburg. Although she died in 1874, the farm was not further subdivided until 1888. Census records reveal that in the interim the Vanderbilt House was occupied by Joseph Leviness Vanderbilt and Cornelia Vredenburg Vanderbilt. Joseph Leviness was the son of John King Vanderbilt's brother Oliver. Under the terms of the subdivision, John Frederick Smith, the son of Charles H. and Mary Ann Vredenburg Smith (she was Cornelia Vredenburg's younger sister) acquired the portion which included the Vanderbilt House. In 1889 Joseph Mortimer Vanderbilt, the son of Joseph Leviness Vanderbilt, received the house and the adjacent lands from John Frederick Smith. The last member of the family to occupy the house, Joseph Mortimer Vanderbilt, the father of Amy Vanderbilt, noted arbiter of social decorum, sold the house in 1908, the year in which she was born.

When the house was purchased and restored by Miss Dorothy Valentine Smith in 1955, it was once again in family hands. It stands now as one of the few surviving structures on Staten Island that can be associated with the 19th-century history of the Vanderbilt family. It evokes the era when the Clove Valley area where it is located was the enclave of Vanderbilts described in Miss Smith's book, Staten Island Gateway to New York.¹¹ The John King Vanderbilt House also stands to as a tribute to Miss Smith's lifelong interest in and concern for the history of Staten Island and the buildings which embody it.

Description

Set back from the street located on a spacious lawn enhanced by shrubs, large trees and other plantings, the John King Vanderbilt House is a two-story, three-bay-wide clapboard-clad building set on a low rubblestone foundation. Employing a timber frame with brick nogging, the house has a tall attic story and gable roof covered with black asphalt shingles. A one-and-a-half story kitchen wing with a lower lean-to extension is attached to the rear elevation of the main house. The cladding is painted white. Narrow clapboards appear on the facade; elsewhere wider clapboards are used. An unspecified amount of deteriorated siding was replaced in the 1955-56 restoration.¹² Tall twin brick chimneys are located on the southeastern elevation; the lower portions of the chimney walls are exposed to the height of the first story window lintels. A third brick chimney rises above the gabled end of the kitchen wing. The chimneys were rebuilt in 1955 from the roofline up.

Except for the attic story of the kitchen wing where three-over-three and four-over-four sash appear, window openings employ six-over-six sash. Only the squared-off molding applied to the lintels distinguishes the simple window enframements. Dark green louvered shutters are used in the upper stories and solid panelled shutters in the first story. All but two pairs of shutters were replaced in 1955-56; the original hardware was reused. The first floor facade shutters were recently removed; first floor shutters have also been removed at several locations on the other

elevations. Window placement on the side elevations differs. A single line of windows on the northwestern elevation illuminates the stair hall. On the opposite elevation two lines flank the rear chimney; a third line is placed near the corner of the structure, just southwest of the front chimney.

Detailing is concentrated on the facade. The box gutter is carried on small scrolled, decoratively perforated brackets. Rectangular panels adorn the fascia board between the brackets. Leading to the spacious entry/staircase hall, the main entrance is located in the western bay. The door surround is comprised of a four-light transom, slender three-pane sidelights above panelled sections, and deep reveals which are also panelled. The solid panelled door retains the original hardware.

A sloping roof covers the facade-wide porch. Miss Smith's description of the 1955-56 restoration notes the following: the much deteriorated original porch was removed; the brick piers were rebuilt; and the replacement top and bottom rails, square balusters and fishtail brackets beneath the lower rail were reproduced from the few surviving original elements. In replacing the four round porch posts, the original bases were omitted. The floorboards do not duplicate the original eight-inch-wide boards; the width of the ceiling boards and the clapboard cladding of the gable ends were reproduced.

The original lean-to structure at the rear of the kitchen wing was replaced in 1955. It houses a modern kitchen. The panelled door on the southeastern side of the lean-to section is similar to the main entrance door and may be original. The pent roof supported by decorative brackets above it was a later addition either reused or reproduced in the restoration. A pair of modern single-pane windows take up most of the rear wall of the lean-to extension. Another modern lean-to extension, possibly used for storage, is located on the northwestern side of the structure in the angle formed by the main section of the house and the one-and-a-half-story section of the kitchen wing. It replaces an earlier smaller extension at the same located and project beyond the wall of the main house.

Report prepared by
Shirley Zavin, Research Department

Report edited by
Marjorie Pearson, Director of Research

NOTES

1. Biographical information pertaining to John King Vanderbilt has been taken from the following sources: Morris Bricks, "John King Vanderbilt," Unpublished ms. submitted to Landmarks Preservation Commission at public hearing, September 29, 1987; Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, Staten Island and its People: A History, 1609-1929 (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1930), V, pp. 124-126; Marjorie Johnson, "Genealogy: Vanderbilt, Vredenburg, Smith Families," Unpublished ms. submitted to Landmarks Preservation Commission at public hearing, September 29, 1987.
2. Perhaps he shared the vision of the island's promising economic potential held earlier by New York Governor and United States Vice-President Daniel D. Tompkins who settled on Staten Island in 1814. Perhaps the presence on Staten Island of many family members and his deep roots there provided additional incentive. Or perhaps conditions in the metropolis which led many Manhattan merchants to seek suburban residences on the island in the 1830s and 1840s played a role as well.
3. A photograph of the Corson farmhouse appears in Dorothy Smith, "The Clove and Its Valley," Staten Island Historian, 17 (July-September, 1956), 25.
4. Smith, "The Clove and Its Valley," p. 26.
5. Leng and Davis, Staten Island and its People, pp. 124-126. Date of construction is provided in the genealogical history of J. Mortimer Vanderbilt. A brief account of construction is provided as follows: "During its construction in 1836 people would drive from miles around to view it, for the labor was being paid for by the day, an unusual thing in those times, and the handhewn timbers for it were being brought across from Bayonne in row boats."
6. The monumental temple-fronted Pavilion Hotel crowned by an enormous cupola was part of this new development.
7. An 1838 engraving which shows the Marble House, the Pavillion Hotel, the temple-fronted buildings along the shore and Sailors' Snug Harbor is reproduced in Barnett Shepherd, Sailors' Snug Harbor: 1801-1976 (New York: Publishing Center for Cultural Resources, 1979) p. 44.
8. The center section of the Abraham Wood House, for example, is flanked by extensions. The Moore-McMillen House has a slightly setback two-bay wide extension attached to the side-hall elevation. A similar extension is attached to the Stephens House in Richmondtown.
9. The differences include the full-story basement of the Bennett House, the small rectangular attic-level windows of the Stephens House front and rear elevations and its one-bay wide porch.
10. Bricks, "John King Vanderbilt," p. 1 reproduces the obituary which appeared in the Richmond County Gazette, June 28, 1871.

11. Dorothy Smith, Staten Island: Gateway to new York (Philadelphia, New York & London: Chilton Book Company, 1970), pp. 110-121.
12. The restoration of the Vanderbilt House is described in Dorothy V. Smith, "A Small Restoration," Staten Island Historian, 18 (October-December, 1967) 28-29.

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 John King Vanderbilt 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 John King Vanderbilt House is one of the dwindling number of surviving structures built during the early 19th-century transitional period, when Staten Island was rapidly evolving from an isolated rural area to a community populated by new institutions and their structures, suburban developments, and growing villages; that as one of these structures the Vanderbilt House illustrates Staten Island's history and architectural development; that it is one of the few remaining structures on Staten Island associated with the early history of the Vanderbilt family; that the house was built by John King Vanderbilt, a relatively prosperous man, who was born in Manhattan and who, joining the influx of newcomers, arrived on Staten Island in 1825; that the simple but stately Vanderbilt House in its neo-classical vocabulary demonstrates one of several responses made by the local building tradition to the flowering of the Greek Revival style on Staten Island; that the house was built on the site of the 18th-century Corson farm; that the house was owned and/or occupied until 1908 by members of the interrelated Vanderbilt and Vredenburg families; that the Vanderbilt House was acquired and restored in 1955 by a member of the family, the eminent Dorothy Valentine Smith, and affords tangible evidence of her lifelong interest in the history of Staten Island and the buildings which embody it.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of the Charter of the City of New York and Title 25, Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the John King Vanderbilt House, 1197 Clove Road, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 246, Lot 56, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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_____. Staten Island: Gateway to New York. Philadelphia, New York & London: Chilton Book Company, 1970.



Photo Credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission

JOHN KING VANDERBILT HOUSE
1197 Clove Road
Date: c. 1836

Architect: Unknown



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