

**LOUIS A. AND LAURA STIRN HOUSE**, 79 Howard Avenue, Staten Island.  
Built 1908, Kafka & Lindenmeyr, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 587, Lot 1, in part, excluding the recorded easement that runs along the south lot line or 15 feet from the south lot line, whichever is narrower.

On May 16, 2000, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Louis A. and Laura Stirn House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in support of the designation including representatives of Historic Districts Council, the Staten Island Preservation League Preserve & Protect, and the Serpentine Art & Nature Commons. The owner did not take a position on the designation at the time of the hearing. The Commission has received nine letters in support of the designation including a letter Assemblyman Eric N. Vitaliano. An electronic petition posted on the internet had ten signatories in support of the designation.

Summary

This large neo-Renaissance mansion with Arts and Crafts detailing is an excellent example of early-twentieth-century country house design. The house was built for Louis A. and Laura Stirn in 1908 to the plans of Kafka & Lindenmeyr. One of the few houses of its size and type surviving on Staten Island, it is prominently sited on Grymes Hill where it commands a spectacular view of New York Harbor. Grymes Hill was developed with large estates in the 1830s and 1840s and by the early 1900s, had become a fashionable residential neighborhood favored by wealthy German businessmen. Stirn, a German emigre, was a prominent silk commission merchant and owner of textile mills. His wife, the granddaughter of bridge builder John Roebling, was an expert on botany and horticulture. Modeled after an Italian Renaissance villa, the Stirn house is a two-and-one-half-story structure composed of a symmetrical center block and flanking dependencies. Clad with stucco and capped by red tile hipped roof with dormers and deep bracketed eaves, it has Ionic porticos on the front and rear facades and a gabled porch at the entrance to the kitchen wing. Arts and Crafts details include the polychrome terra-cotta frieze, iron balconies, and stained glass rondels. The building incorporated a number of technologically advanced features including glazed polychrome terra cotta, cast concrete, and Portland cement stucco facings.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Grymes Hill<sup>1</sup>

Located in northeastern Staten Island, where it commands a magnificent view of New York Harbor and the Verrazano Narrows, Grymes Hill is bounded on the northwest by Victory Boulevard, on the east by Richmond Road and Van Duzer Street, on the south by the Staten Island Expressway, and on the west by Clove Road. This land was part of the 5,100-acre manor which was granted to Governor Thomas Dongan (1634-1715) in 1687 and subsequently passed to his nephews and their heirs. In the 1830s, the hill began to be developed with estates. The neighborhood took its name from Madame Suzette Grymes, wife of the noted New Orleans lawyer John Randolph Grymes, who began buying property near the present-day intersection of Howard Avenue and Grymes Hill Road in 1836, creating an estate known as Capo di Monte. Other notable landowners included Orondates Mauran, who built a summer house in 1831 on property extending along the west side of Howard Avenue between Eddy Street and Ada Place, and Major George Howard, who purchased forty-two acres on Grymes Hill between 1830 and 1833, including all the land on Howard Avenue between Louis and Eddy Streets. Howard, a former soldier who served as boarding officer for the port of New York and later as keeper of the public stores on Staten Island, built a house for himself on the southwest corner of his land. The northern half of his property was divided into fifty-foot-wide lots which were sold at auction in August 1836. The property now occupied by the Stirn house<sup>2</sup> was part of a larger group of lots purchased by real estate investor Caleb Tompkins Ward. In 1841 Ward sold his Grymes Hill lots to Harvey North, an importer, from New Orleans. In 1853, North moved to France, selling his property to Thomas Eakin of Nashville who built a house known as "East Over" to the designs of James Renwick.<sup>3</sup> In 1879, Eakin's heirs sold a tract of land<sup>4</sup> to the actor-journalist Henry Sedley, owner of the adjoining property at 37 Howard Avenue.<sup>5</sup> In 1895, Henry Sedley sold his house on Grymes Hill to Eleanor Phelps Sedley.<sup>6</sup> In June 1907 she sold the land acquired from on the Eakins family to Louis A. and Laura Stirn.<sup>7</sup> The property had a frontage of about 275 feet on Howard Avenue and extended down the hillside about 600 feet to Sunset Terrace. (The lot now measures 274 feet by 200 feet.)

In 1907, when the Stirns bought their property, Grymes Hill was considered one of the most "attractive residential sections of Staten Island" featuring a mix of large estates, suburban houses, and institutions that

complemented the residential character of the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> These included the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel (1899) at 44 Austin Place<sup>9</sup> and Notre Dame Academy which was established in an old house (built c. 1850, enlarged 1903) at 21 Howard Avenue in 1904, and moved to its present quarters (built c. 1854-57, enlarged 1920s, 1930s) at 76 Howard Avenue in 1906. Additions to the neighborhood also included two new enclaves of large developer-built suburban houses: Brighton Heights Park and Morningside (c. 1906).<sup>10</sup> In addition to Louis Stirn, several businessmen were erecting large mansions for their private use. These included silk merchant C. Allan Blyth who built a Craftsman-inspired residence, designed by the noted architect Henry Atterbury Smith, at 103 Howard Avenue (1907-08) and brewer William Horrmann who erected an eccentric mansion modeled after a Bavarian castle at 189 Howard Avenue (completed 1910, demolished). During this period a number of German families began settling on Grymes Hill. In addition to the Stirns and Horrmanns, "prominent German families who called Grymes Hill home for generations [included] the Heinrichs, the Badenhausens, the Strohmeiers, [and] the Druckliebs."<sup>11</sup>

### Louis A. and Laura Stirn<sup>12</sup>

Louis A. Stirn, the son of a prominent Lutheran clergyman Rev. Samuel Stirn and his wife, Emma Kauffman Stirn, was born in 1853 in the village of Eschersheim, a suburb of Frankfurt, Germany. In 1877, at the age of fourteen, Louis Stirn left Germany to move to New York City where he found employment in the silk business. In 1884 he became a partner in the firm of Oscar Schoenherr, who was a commission merchant representing several German manufacturers of velvets and woolens. Stirn established his own firm in 1894. Three years later, his brother Edmund became a partner in the firm, which was known as L. & E. Stirn. Initially, the firm was an import house dealing in ribbons, silks, velvets, and chiffons which it distributed to such leading firms as Marshall Field & Co. By the 1910s, it had become an export house and commission agent specializing in the sale and distribution of domestic cloth. Louis and Edmund Stirn also controlled the Concordia Silk Mills which had operations employing several thousand workers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Watertown, New York, and Johnstown, Tennessee.<sup>13</sup>

Louis A. Stirn moved to Staten Island in 1882. Six years later, he married Laura Natalie Methfessel, daughter of Professor Anton Gottlieb Methfessel and

Laura A. Roebling Methfessel. Professor Methfessel (1829-93) was one of the most prominent educators on Staten Island, who in 1862 founded the Methfessel School, a boys' boarding and day school that became the Staten Island Academy and Latin School, the island's most prestigious private primary and secondary school. His wife, Laura A. Roebling Methfessel, was the daughter of John Augustus Roebling, the famed bridge builder and manufacturer of wire cable, who planned and oversaw the early construction of the Brooklyn Bridge (1867-83, a designated New York City Landmark), completed under the direction of his son Washington and daughter-in-law Emily.

The Stirns took an active part in the community life of Staten Island. Louis Stirn was a member of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, the Staten Island Civic League, and the Richmond County Country Club. He was also active in several national trade organizations and was a member of the Manhattan Club. Laura Stirn was a founder of the St. Cecilia Society of Staten Island (a women's singing society) and was a member of the Staten Island Institute of Arts & Sciences, the Staten Island Bird Club, and the Garden Club of Staten Island, where she was known for her collection of rare plants. She was also active in several charitable organizations, including the Stapleton Day Nursery and the Staten Island Hospital, where she served as a member of the board of trustees.

#### Kafka & Lindenmeyr<sup>14</sup>

Organized around 1906, Kafka & Lindenmeyr was the successor firm to Hugo Kafka & Co. Hugo Kafka, Sr. (1843-1915), the firm's founder, was born in Prague and was educated at the Polytechnikum in Zurich, where he studied under Gottfried Semper.<sup>15</sup> In 1874, he immigrated to Philadelphia to work with Herman Schwarzmann on the Centennial Exposition of 1876. In 1878, Kafka moved his architectural practice to New York. He had numerous commissions for apartment buildings and houses. He also designed Saint Peter's German Evangelical Reformed Church, now the Free Magyar Reformed Church, in Kreischerville, Staten Island (1883).<sup>16</sup>

During his career Hugo Kafka [Sr.] formed several partnerships.<sup>17</sup> At the turn of century Kafka established the firm of Hugo Kafka & Sons with Hugh (aka Hugo, Jr., b. 1875) and Frederick P. Kafka (b. 1876), a civil engineer. In 1903, Hugo Kafka, Sr., began to curtail his involvement with the firm due to rheumatoid arthritis. He retired entirely in December 1905. By May 1906, Frederick P. Kafka also left the business to pursue a career in the manufacture and installation of fireproof building materials. In June 1906, Ludwig

Lindenmeyr, a twenty-six year old New Jersey-born architect, became a partner in the firm of Kafka & Lindenmeyr. Hugh Kafka and Ludwig Lindenmeyr worked together until around 1912, when Hugh Kafka left the firm to become the manager of the New York office of the Bay State Pink Granite Company. Ludwig Lindenmeyr continued to practice under his own name until around 1918. He died prior to 1920, when his wife was listed in the Manhattan directory as a widow. During the mid-1920s, Frederick and Hugh Kafka were partners with Pierce Taylor in the Kafka-Taylor Building Construction Company in New Rochelle, where the Kafkas had resided since the early 1900s.

#### The Early Twentieth-Century American Country House and the Design of the Louis and Laura Stirn House<sup>18</sup>

In the 1890s, the increasing density of America's cities created "a nostalgia for the healthier and more tranquil world of the countryside."<sup>19</sup> A new interest arose in nature, gardening, outdoor recreation, and country living, fostered by such publications as *House and Garden*, *Country Life in America*, *American Homes and Gardens*, *House Beautiful*, and *Town and Country*. Within a few years, a boom developed in country and suburban house building which lasted through the 1920s. This movement was fueled by a rapidly expanding economy which greatly enlarged the ranks of the wealthy. It was also aided by improvements in public transportation and the advent of the automobile which made commuting to the suburbs and country much easier, and by large-scale immigration which provided the numerous workers needed to build and staff large country houses and maintain estate grounds. In contrast to the country houses of the Victorian period, which were often erected as vacation homes in resort areas, the country houses of this period were usually permanent residences that were located in the environs of a major city and were occupied year round.

An excellent example of early-twentieth-century country house design, the Stirn house presents an interesting blend of formal classicism with an Arts and Crafts aesthetic. This melding of design traditions was a fairly recent innovation in the field and is usually associated with such leading designers of the period as Charles Platt and Robert W. Gardner. In keeping with current theories which stressed the integration of country houses with their surrounding gardens and landscape, the Stirn House is set well back from the road behind a broad expanse of lawn and a semi-circular driveway. The house is located just at the edge of the hillside with its rear porch extending onto a slight jut of land that formerly commanded a spectacular view

of Stapleton (now obscured by trees) and the harbor. The choice of the Italian Renaissance style for the house may have been suggested by this siting, since Italian villas are often built on hillside sites and usually have terraced gardens. In addition, Italian Renaissance villas and their gardens were becoming an increasingly fashionable source of inspiration for designers and writers on design during this period, notably for the influential architect and landscape designer Charles Platt, whose *Italian Gardens* of 1894 was the first illustrated book in English on the Italian Renaissance garden, and Edith Wharton, who published the popular *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* with illustrations by Maxfield Parrish in 1905.<sup>20</sup>

While far from a direct copy of a Italian Renaissance villa, the Stirn house exhibits such characteristic features as the block-like form of the main portion of the house, the symmetrical treatment of the principal facades, the stucco cladding, the low-pitched hipped-roof covered with terra-cotta tiles, the deep overhanging eaves supported by brackets, the columned porticos, and the arched first-story windows surmounted by smaller rectangular windows. Other elements of the design, such as the stylized Ionic capitals of the porch columns and bracketed keystones of the window surrounds and the decoration of the wrought-iron balustrades, the polychrome terra-cotta frieze and elaborate bracing beneath the roof eaves reflect the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. The simplicity of the moldings and the emphasis on the textured surfaces of the stuccoed walls and tiled roofs are also typical of Arts and Crafts design.

Though designed in a historic style, the Stirn House incorporated the latest in mechanical equipment and construction materials, including concrete window surrounds, cast "composition" column capitals, fire-proof terra-cotta roof tiles, and Portland cement stucco facing materials which were deemed to be permanent in color and texture and therefore maintenance free.<sup>21</sup> The polychrome terra-cotta used for the frieze was also a recent innovation and was very unusual for a suburban house of the period.<sup>22</sup>

#### Construction and Later History of the Stirn House

Kafka & Lindenmeyr filed plans for the Stirn house with Staten Island Department of Buildings in March 1908.<sup>23</sup> Construction began almost immediately and was completed in December 1908. The cost of construction was \$32,000, excluding the land which had cost \$14,000.

The large house provided accommodations for Louis and Laura Stirn, their five children, Laura Stirn's

widowed sister, Emily Wicchers, her son Manolo, two maids, and a cook. According to Laura Patrick, the Stirns' granddaughter, there was a great hall, living room, music room, conservatory, dining room, kitchen, pantry, and powder room on the first floor; six bedrooms, a sitting room, and two bathrooms on the second floor; and two large bedrooms, and three maid's rooms, on the third floor.

The Stirns continued to occupy their "charming residence ... known for its splendidly appointed gardens and beautiful view of the surrounding country and adjacent waters"<sup>24</sup> until their deaths-- Laura Stirn died in 1943, Louis Stirn in 1962. During the 1920s Stirn built houses on Howard Avenue for his son Albert Stirn (No. 55) and son-in-law Arthur Benbow Elliman (No. 56) and their families. Following Louis Stirn's death the house was sold to Reuben Gross, a prominent attorney and leader in the Jewish community, and his wife Blanche Gross. The house is now owned by the Estate of Blanche Gross.

The house remains remarkably intact. Changes to the exterior have included a sympathetic modification of dormer windows on the south gable in the 1910s, replacement of the original trellised siding on the conservatory with modern materials in the 1970s-1980s, and replacement of most of the attic dormer windows in the 1990s. It is, together with Ernest Flag's Stone Court (1898 to c. 1917, a designated New York City Landmark), one of the rare surviving examples of the early-twentieth-century country house design on Staten Island and is one of the few houses of its size and type within the city limits.

#### Description

The Louis and Laura Stirn House is located at the center of a trapezoidal mid-block lot which has a frontage of 274 feet along Howard Avenue and is approximately 200 feet deep. The house is approached by a semi-circular driveway. An Italian Renaissance-inspired villa with Arts and Crafts detailing, the house is constructed of stucco-clad masonry and is capped by a clay-tiled hipped-roof with overhanging bracketed eaves. Approximately sixty-six feet wide and forty-seven feet deep, the building has a symmetrically arranged two-and-one-half story main block which is flanked on the north by a two-and-one-half story service wing and on the south by an enclosed porch (originally a conservatory). Aside from changes to the south porch, the house retains most of its original detailing. The first and second stories have original wood multipane sash and casement windows including several windows with stained glass rondels. The



original attic windows have been replaced with non-historic six-over-one vinyl sash windows.

**Western Facade:**

*Main Block* The primary facade facing Howard Avenue features a columned portico which extends across the three recessed center bays of the main block. The porch is articulated with paired Ionic columns and Doric corner piers which support a full entablature and a paneled parapet. The concrete columns, entablature, and parapet are painted. The floor of the porch is covered with terrazzo tiles bordered with concrete. The recessed entry wall at the rear of the porch has three openings. At the center of the facade, a rectangular window is divided by mullions and transom bars into a large central opening (with paired casement windows), sidelights, and transoms. The windows retain their original leaded glass; the center casements and transom are decorated with stained-glass rondels. The south entrance bay retains its original Arts and Crafts wood door with an arched window protected by a wrought-iron grille. The north window is a sash window which has its original multipane leaded-glass lights. The corner pavilions have floor-length windows at both the first and second story. The arched first-story windows have recessed surrounds set off by bracketed keystones. The openings retain their original paired multilight French doors, curved transom bars, and transoms with radiating lights framing central lunettes. Decorative wrought-iron railings extend across the base of the window openings. Matching railings are used for the balconies beneath the second story windows. The rectangular second-story window openings have their original paired single-light French doors topped by multi-light transoms. Partially screened from view by the parapet surmounting the porch, the three rectangular windows in the recessed center section of the facade have original six-over-one wood sashes. The north and south windows also retain their original louvered wood shutters. The second story is surmounted by a paneled terra-cotta frieze. Extending from the frieze are heavy shaped brackets that support the bracing for the shaped rafters beneath the overhanging eaves of roof. Wire mesh has been installed in the spaces between the brackets and eaves to prevent birds from nesting. The building's low-pitched hipped roof has hipped cross gables capping the projecting corner pavilions. At the center of the facade are three hipped-roofed dormers with stucco walls and simple wood surrounds which set off non-historic six-over-one vinyl sash windows. An old pipe vent projects from the roof between the north dormer and the hipped roof of the north pavilion.

*Service Wing* The service wing, which projects from the main block on the north side of the building,

consists of a hipped-roofed two-and-one-half story block and a shed-roofed one-story extension. The wing is lower in height than the main block and is capped by a simple cornice. An entrance on the west wall of the extension is set off by a wood porch resting on a masonry base. The porch is approached by four stone steps which are flanked by masonry plinths with stuccoed walls and cast concrete capstones. The porch is sheltered by a gabled roof which is supported by paired square columns with bracketed capitals. The gable pediment is articulated by molded raking cornices and horizontal corner cornices which frame the shallow arch of the vaulted porch ceiling. Non-historic metal numerals reading "79" are affixed to the pediment. On the sides of the porch the space between the columns and the west wall of the service wing is filled by original wood lattices decorated with an arch motif. The segmental arched entrance on the west wall of the service wing retains its original paneled wood-and-glass door. The entry is lit by a non-historic light fixture. To the south of the entrance the western facade of the two-and-one-half story portion of the service wing is pierced by a large segmental-arched opening at the first story and a rectangular window opening at the second story. The segmental opening retains its original molded wood surround which is divided into a pair of four-over-one sash windows, two-over-one sidelights, and multilight transoms. The second story also retains its original wood-framed window which consists of a pair of multilight leaded casements topped by a multilight transom with a central stained glass rondel. The basement windows, which are almost completely below ground level, also retain their original multilight wood sash.

**North Facade:**

The north facade is divided into three parts: the west corner bay which is articulated to match the primary facade facing Howard Avenue, the east corner bay which is articulated to match the building's eastern (hillside) facade, and the northern facade of the service wing.

*West bay* At present the first story of the west corner bay is concealed by shrubbery. Historic photographs show that it is lit by a pair of narrow rectangular window openings which originally contained two-over-one wood window sash. The rectangular second story has its original four-over-one wood sash but has lost its louvered shutters. The attic dormer located near the service wing has a non-historic vinyl sash window in place of its original paired triple-light casements.

*Service wing* The shed roof of the projecting first-story extension of the service wing is set off by heavy brackets. The first-story facade features a central wood

and stucco oriel flanked by oculus windows with keyed enframements. The oriel retains its original paired casements which are divided by wood glazing bars into a four-over-one arrangement. The casements are surmounted by a transom which retains its original multipane leaded glass and central decorative rondel. The angled sides of the oriel are pierced by narrow lights which have their original two-over-one wood casements. The oculi also retain their original multipane wood sash. The second story of the service wing is lit by a single window at the center of the facade. It retains its original six-over-one wood-sash window. At the center of the attic is an tripartite dormer consisting of a tall gabled center bay with an arched window flanked by lower shed-roofed bays with square-headed openings. The wood casement windows in these sidelights and the wood fanlight in the arched transom in the center bay are original, but the lower portion of the center bay contains a non-historic six-over-one vinyl sash window.

*East Bay* A massive stuccoed chimney is set into the corner where the east bay meets the service wing. This bay contains the building's basement entrance which is approached by concrete stair and paved areaway which are protected by a non-historic iron pipe rail. The basement entrance has a historic six-light wood door which is surmounted by a triple-light transom. At the first story, the rectangular window opening has its original wood casement windows which are topped by a transom. At the second story the window retains its original six-over-one wood sash window.

#### **Eastern facade:**

*Main block* The articulation of the eastern facade is similar to that of the Howard Avenue facade except that it has an elliptical portico and the windows are larger. Because the site slopes to the east, the facade has a high basement which is screened from view by a terrace that extends across the entire length of the main block. The terrace is approached by a graceful curving masonry staircase which leads to the portico at the center of the facade. The original balustrade with turned posts which extended the perimeter of the terrace has been replaced with a non-historic concrete block balustrade; however the terrace retains its historic brick floor laid in a herringbone pattern. The porch has its original wood ceiling. It has a non-historic light fixture at its center. Chains have been suspended from the ceiling to support a non-historic wicker swing seat.

At the rear of the porch, the door and window openings align with the openings on the Howard Avenue facade. The entry has a historic multi-pane glass-and-wood door, the large window has a tripartite transom with a center stained glass rondel surmounting

a single clear pane in a historic wood surround. The porch is also accessed by a doorway on the south wall of the north pavilion which retains its original paneled wood door with multi-pane windows and multi-pane transom.

The corner pavilions flanking the entrance porch have original projecting wood bay windows at the first story and large segmental arched openings at the second story. The wood bases beneath the bays have been modified but the windows remain intact. They are divided into a large central light and sidelights which are surmounted by transoms with multipane leaded glass and a central stained-glass rondel. At the second story the arched openings contain a pair of French doors with four-light-over-single-light windows flanked by narrower sidelights with two lights over a single light. The windows open on to small balconies screened by curved wrought-iron railings above the first story bays. Like the Howard Avenue facade, the eastern facade is lit by three dormer windows which have non-historic vinyl sash.

*Service wing* The basement of the east wall of the service wing is partially excavated to accommodate the staircase down to the areaway and basement entrance. There are three large square-headed basement windows which retain historic multipane wood window sash and are protected by historic iron grilles. A smaller rectangular window with a historic iron grille is located at the base of the shed-roofed extension. The first story has a large segmental arch window opening which retains its original window sash featuring a pair of four-light-over-one-light casements and two-light-over-one light sidelights and is topped by a tripartite transom with leaded stained glass. The square-headed second-story window has an original four-over-one wood sash window.

#### **South Facade**

The south facade is divided into three sections by a pair of massive chimneys. The narrow outer bays have arched window openings at the first story and square headed window openings at the second story. The first story windows are original and match the corner pavilion windows of the Howard Avenue facade. The second story windows retain their original four-over-one sash windows. The center section is distinguished by its elliptical one-story enclosed wood porch which originally served as a conservatory. The porch retains its elegant bowed cornice, pilasters, and bracketed keystones, but the window openings have been partially enclosed with non-historic wood in-fill; the window glass has been replaced, and decorative wood trim which created a latticework pattern on the pilasters has been removed. The porch retains its

original entrance at the center of the facade, but the door and transom are non-historic replacements. The center bays at the second story have the same articulation as the outer bays and retain their original

large hipped roofed dormer which has four windows with non-historic vinyl sash.

Report prepared by  
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window sash. At the center of the attic there is one

#### Notes

1. This section on the history of Grymes Hill is based on Charles Gilbert Hine, *History and Legend of Howard Avenue and the Serpentine Road, Grymes Hill, Staten Island* (Staten Island, NY: Hine's Annual, 1914); Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People* (New York: 1929-30), v. 1, 250-255; "Grymes Hill: Quiet Streets, Magnificent Views," *Staten Island Advance*, Apr. 30, 1990, B1, 2.; *Atlas of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York* (New York: E. Robinson, 1907), pls. 26; *Atlas of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York* (New York: J.B. Beers & Co., 1874), pls. 8, 9,10. *Atlas of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York* (New York: E. Robinson, 1907), pls. 9,10,11.
2. Lots 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, and part of lot 30 on the Howard auction map.
3. Later the home of broker James Morgan Davis, East Over is illustrated in Dorothy Valentine Smith, *This Was Staten Island* (New York: Staten Island Historical Society, 1968), 96.
4. Howard lots 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, and 30,
5. Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 130, p. 556. Sedley leased 37 Howard Avenue for many years prior to buying the house, which he occupied with his wife and children and sister-in-law from his first marriage, actress Catherine Sinclair, the former wife of Edwin Forrest. The Sedleys and Mrs. Sinclair had a number of friends prominent in the theater and literature who were guests at their home on Howard Avenue, including Charles Dickens. For the Sedleys see Henry Sedley, obituary, *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 1899, 7; Mrs. Henry Sedley, obituary, *New York Times*, June, 16, 1871, 8
6. Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 242, p. 350.
7. Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 331, p. 592.
8. *Staten Island Illustrated* (New York: Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, 1911), np.
9. A new church was erected on the former deJonghe paper factory site on Victory Boulevard at the foot of Grymes Hill in 1968, the former church is now the chapel for Our Lady of Good Counsel School.
10. Brighton Heights Park was located on a portion of the former Duncan estate on the east side of Victory Boulevard, south of Eddy Street; Morningside was bounded by Trossach Road, St. Paul's Avenue, and Occident Avenue and was located on a portion of the former Caleb T. Ward estate.
11. "Grymes Hill," B2.
12. This biography of Louis A. and Laura Stirn is based on an excerpt from his unpublished autobiography made available to the Commission by his granddaughter, Laura Patrick, and on the entries on Louis A Stirn and Anton Gottlieb Methfessel in Leng and Davis, v. 3, 136-138; Louis A. Stirn, obituaries, *New York Times*, Mar. 8, 1962, 31 *Staten Island Advance*, Mar. 8, 1962, 11; Mrs. Louis A. Stirn, obituary, *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 1943, p.15; New York City directories, 1905, 1916; Federal Census (Richmond Co.), 1910, ED 1315, New York State Census (Richmond Co.), 1915, AD 1, ED 27, p. 19.
13. For the Stirns' involvement in the Concordia Silk mills see New York County Clerk, Division of Old Records, Incorporations file 505-1904.

14. This section on Kafka & Lindenmeyr is based on Hugo Kafka, obituaries, *Real Estate Record & Guide*, May 1, 1915, 765, *AIA Journal* 3(1915), 305; Landmarks Preservation Commission, Architects Files; Dennis Stedman Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), 45; James Ward, *Architects in Practice New York City 1900-1940* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989), 41, 47; New York City Directories, 1905-07, 1910-20; New Rochelle Directories, 1916-25; Sandra Tatman and Roger Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia, 198?), 425-426; American Institute of Architects Archives, Washington, D.C., letter from Hugo Kafka, Sr., Aug. 28, 1909. For biographical information on Hugo Kafka, Hugh Kafka and Frederick Kafka see New York State Census (Manhattan)1905, AD 23, ED 23, p.72; for Ludwig Lindenmeyr, Federal Census, 1910, ED 630, New York State Census (Manhattan)1915, AD 31, ED 30, p.28.
15. Kafka received a Medal of Art from the Vienna International Exposition in 1873.
16. The church was a gift of Balthasar Kreischer, owner of the Kreischer Brick Works, to the many German workers in his factory. Hugo Kafka [Sr.] also designed the Joseph Loth Silk Ribbon factory (1885-86, a designated New York City Landmark) at 1818-1838 Amsterdam Avenue and altered and enlarged the Barrett House (later Hotel Cadillac, 1884, 1904, demolished) at West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Broadway for Robert Goelet.
17. The first was a brief association established in 1882 with Alfred B. Mullet, former Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department. In 1887-88 Kafka was a junior partner in William Schickel & Co. and from 1893 to 1896 he was the senior partner in Kafka & Mott with Charles T. Mott.
18. This discussion of the Stirn house in the context of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century country-house design draws on the following sources: Mark Alan Hewitt, *The Architect & the American Country House* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990); Keith N. Morgan, *Charles A. Platt: The Artist as Architect* (Cambridge, Mass: Architectural Heritage Foundation and MIT Press, 1985); *Architectural Record*, 1907-1909; *American Architect & Building News*, 1907-1909; *Country Life In America*, 1907-1909; *House Beautiful*, 1907-1909.
19. Morgan, 79.
20. Historic photographs of the interiors of this house and of the Stirn's prior home on St. Paul's Avenue (built 1888) reveal that they favored period furnishings and formal settings and already owned a great deal of Renaissance Revival furniture which they reused in the living hall and dining room of this house.
21. Hine (p. 34) describes the Stirn residence as a "concrete" house. The house was constructed at a period when architects were beginning to experiment with both concrete block and reinforced concrete construction for domestic architecture and it is possible that the Stirn house may be an early surviving example. However, the building department docket entry for this building describes it as being of brick construction. Because the building's exterior coating remains intact and the original specifications were not available for consultation the material of construction cannot be determined at this time.
22. This is according to phone conversation with Susan Tunick, an expert in the history of the material. For more on the early development of polychrome terra cotta see Susan Tunick, *Terra-Cotta Skyline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 52-61.
23. New York City Department of Buildings, New Building Docket, 71-1908. Also listed in "New Buildings and Alterations," *The Staten Islander*, Mar. 7, 1908, p. 8.
24. Leng and Davis, v. 3, 137.



## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

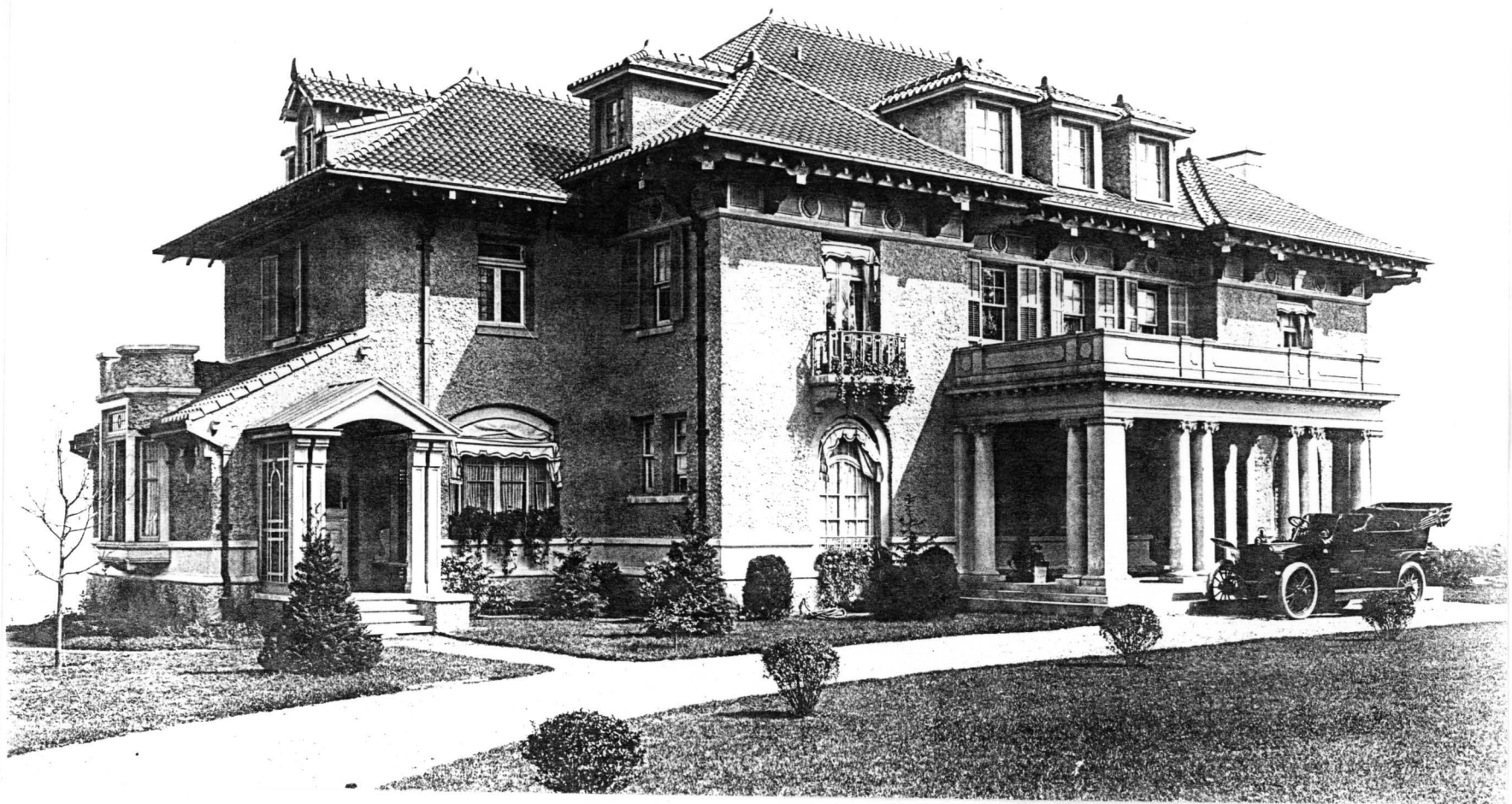
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Louis A. and Laura Stirn House has a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Louis A. and Laura Stirn House, a neo-Renaissance mansion with Arts and Crafts detailing built in 1908 to the plans of Kafka & Lindemyer, is an imposing and architecturally-distinguished example of early-twentieth-century country house design and one of the few houses of its size and type surviving on Staten Island; that it is a prominent reminder of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century history of Grymes Hill as a fashionable enclave of great estates and suburban mansions overlooking New York Harbor and of the prosperous German-American families that settled there in large numbers; that Louis Stirn, who built and occupied the house for over fifty-years, was a German emigre who had become a prominent silk merchant and owner of textile mills and his wife, the granddaughter of bridge builder John Roebling, was an expert on botany and horticulture; that the house's siting, back from Howard Avenue on a sweeping lawn set off by a curving driveway, gives it a commanding presence in the neighborhood; that the two-and-one-half-story stucco-clad, tile-roofed house with a symmetrical center block and flanking dependencies and garden front at the edge of a steep hill is inspired by Italian Renaissance villa design; that the house's Ionic porticos on the front and rear facades and a conservatory/porch on the south side of the house serve to integrate the building with the surrounding gardens and frame views of the distant landscape; that the building incorporated a number of technologically innovative features including glazed polychrome terra cotta, Portland cement stucco facings, and concrete window surrounds.

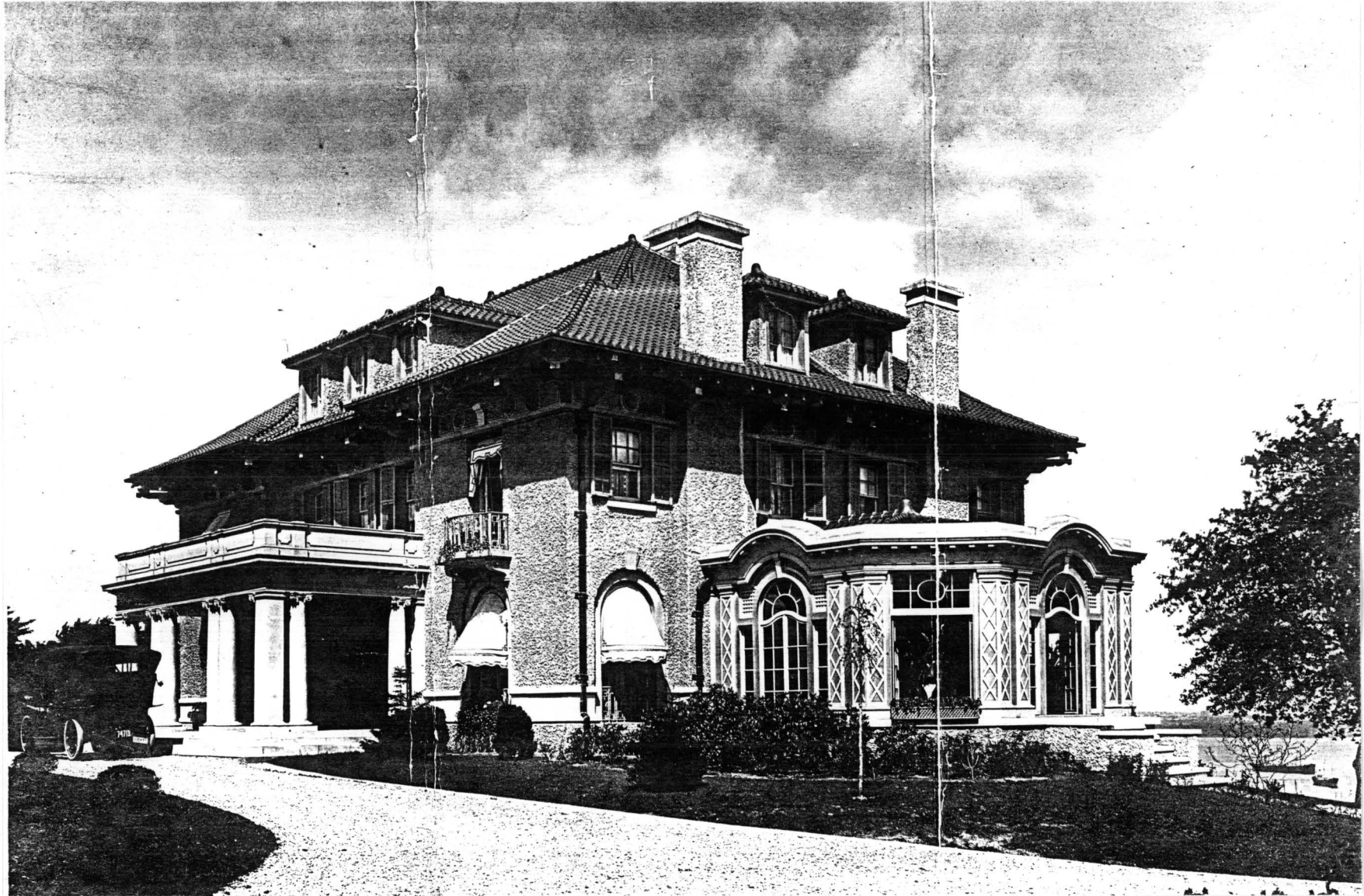
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Louis A. and Laura Stirn House, 79 Howard Avenue, Borough of Staten Island and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Tax Map Block 587, Lot 1, in part excluding the recorded easement that runs along the south lot line or 15 feet from the south lot line, whichever is narrower, as its Landmark Site.



Louis A. and Laura Stirm House  
79 Howard Avenue, Staten Island  
Photo: Carl Forster



Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Historic view (c. 1908-14)  
Photo: Courtesy of Laura Patrick



Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Historic view (c. 1908-14) showing the original treatment of the dormers on the south slope of the roof  
Photo: Courtesy of Laura Patrick





*Louis A. Stirn*

Louis A. Stirn  
Photo: Staten Island and Its People



Laura Natalie Methfessel Stirn  
c. 1930s  
Photo: Laura Patrick



Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
79 Howard Avenue, Staten Island  
Photo: Carl Forster





Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Details of the western entrance facade facing Howard Avenue  
Photos: Carl Forster





Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Details of the western entrance facade facing Howard Avenue  
Photos: Carl Forster



Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
North facade  
Photo: Carl Forster



Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Eastern garden facade overlooking New York Harbor  
Photos: Carl Forster

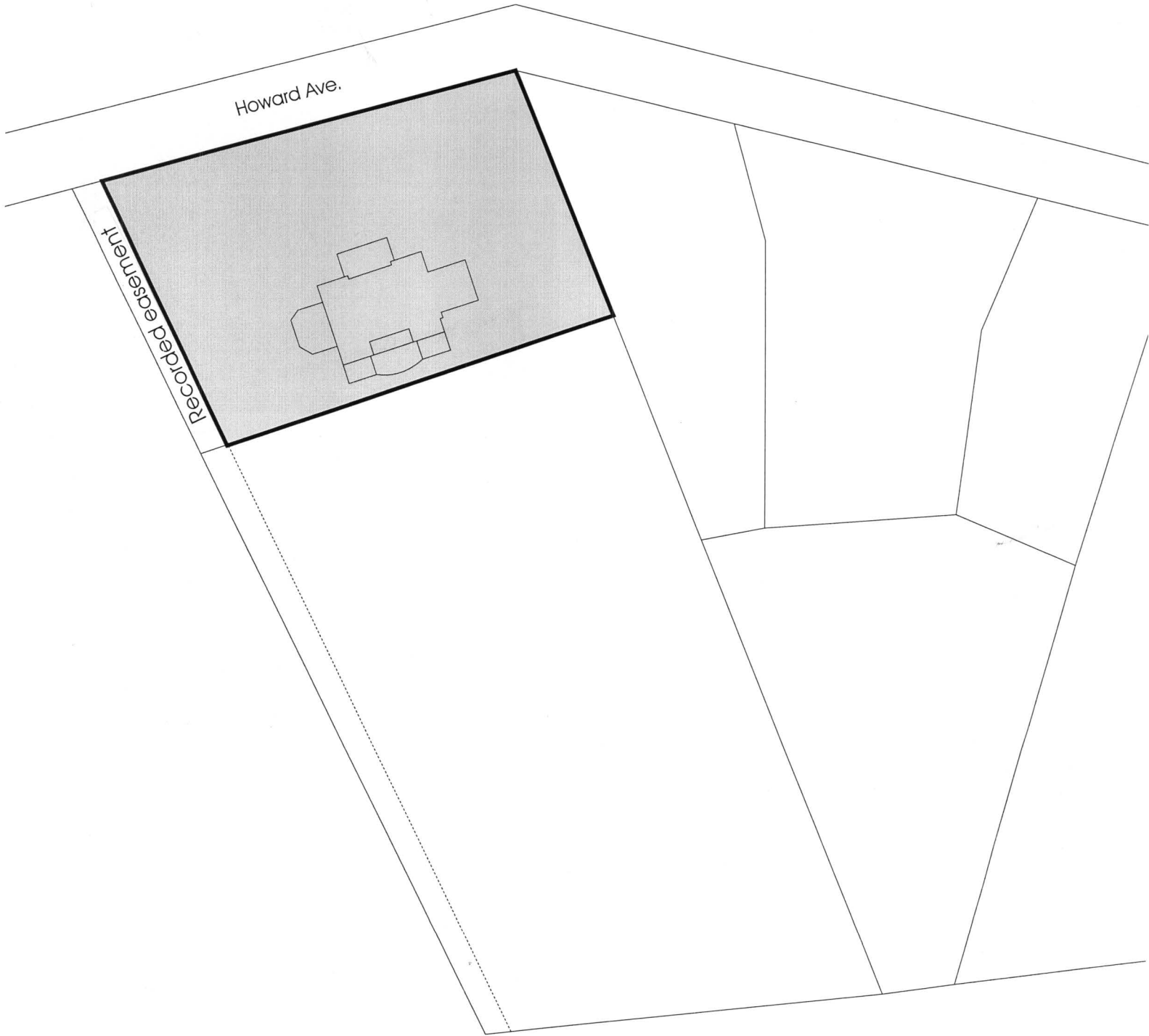


Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Details of the eastern (garden) facade and entrance porch  
Photo: Courtesy of Laura Patrick





Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
Views from the southeast and east showing the southern facade and conservatory  
Photos: Carl Forster



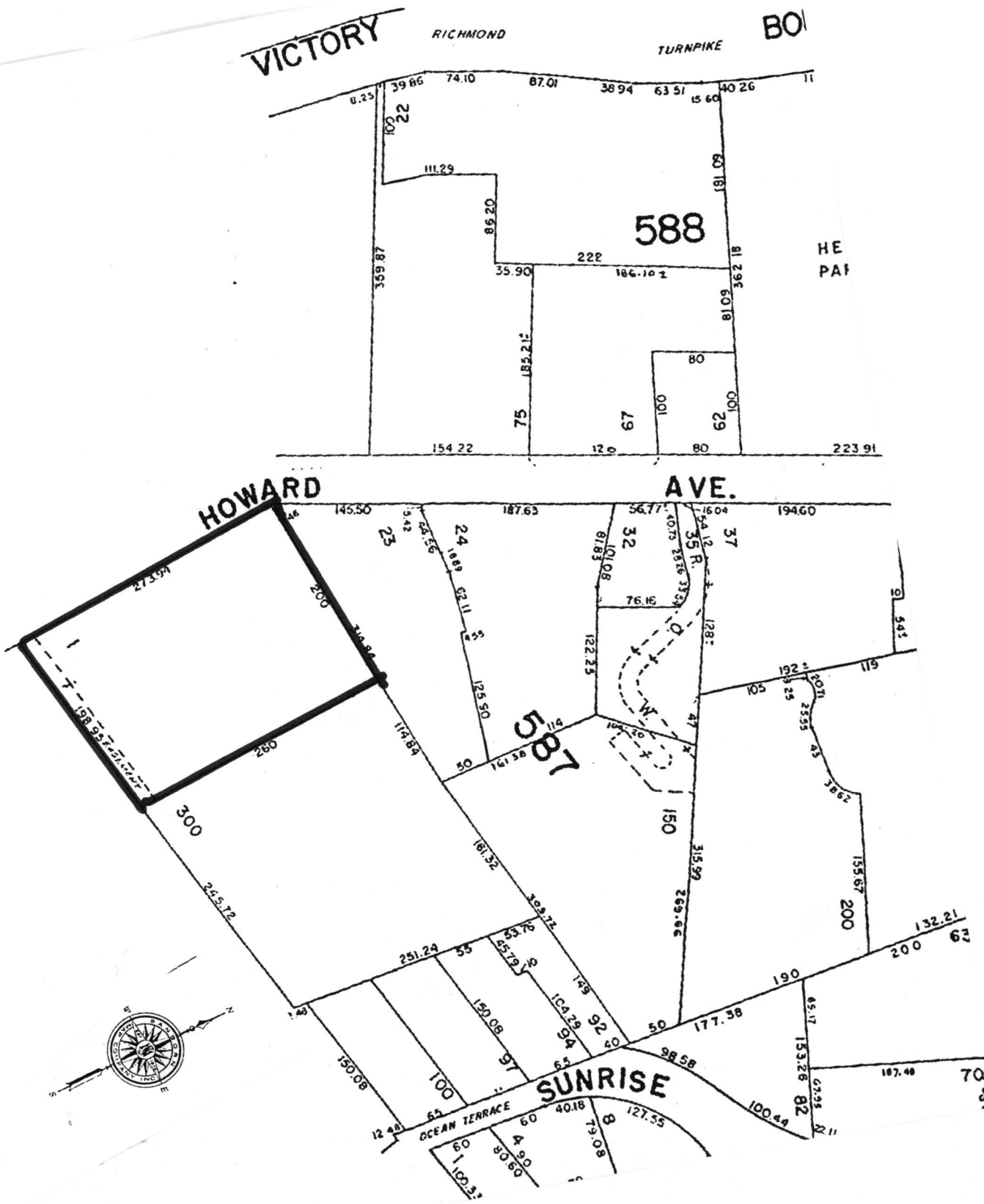
**Louis A. And Laura Stirn House**  
**79 Howard Avenue**  
**Staten Island, New York**  
**Landmark Site: Block 587, Lot 1 in part**

Designated January 30, 2001  
Landmarks Preservation Commission



Landmark Site Boundaries





Louis A. and Laura Stirn House  
 79 Howard Avenue, Staten Island  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 587, Lot 1 in part  
 Source: Sanborn Building & Property Atlas of Staten Island, 2000