

**VAN SICKLEN HOUSE**, 27 Gravesend Neck Road, Brooklyn

Built Early 18<sup>th</sup> century or earlier; rear section, mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; architect undetermined; altered 1905-06, William E. Platt, owner-architect

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 7123, Lot 64

On March 2, 2004, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Van Sicklen House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The then owner spoke in opposition to the designation. Six speakers, including representatives of the Gravesend Historical Society, Bay Ridge Historical Society, Historic Districts Council, and New York Landmarks Conservancy testified in favor of the designation. Council Member Domenic Recchia did not take a position on the designation [noting the owner's wish to sell and get the best price for the property versus the concerns of the many constituents in favor of designation]. The Commission received letters and e-mails in support of the designation including a letters from Assembly Members William Colton and Adele Cohen, the Municipal Art Society, Brooklyn Community Board 15, and the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities.<sup>1</sup>

On October 8, 2015 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a special public hearing on Backlog Initiative Items in the Borough of Brooklyn, including the Lady Moody-Van Sicklen House (Item II, Borough of Brooklyn Group, G). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight speakers testified in favor of the designation, including Council Member Mark Treyger, and representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, the Municipal Arts Society, the Gravesend Historical Society, and the New York City Tour Guides Association and two individuals. No one spoke in opposition to the designation. The Commission received 28 letters and emails in support of the designation, including statements from Brooklyn Community Board 15, the Coney Island History Project, and the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance. Subsequent to the public hearing the owner submitted a letter in opposition to the designation.



## Summary

The Van Sicklen House is among the oldest surviving Dutch-American houses in Brooklyn and the only known extant 18<sup>th</sup> century house largely of stone construction in the borough. Located in the northwest quadrant of the historic town center of Gravesend, the house is linked to the earliest colonial history of Brooklyn in that it occupies part of the house lot of Lady Deborah Moody who founded Gravesend in the 1640s. It appears to be one of the earliest surviving houses in Brooklyn and New York City. In 1702, farmer and property owner, Ferdinandus Van Sicklen, Jr., acquired this land. Members of the Van Sicklen family were probably responsible for constructing the house, which was built in sections, beginning in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps earlier, and for expanding it in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Van Sicklens who occupied this house were farmers and prominent members of the Gravesend community serving in a variety of municipal and institutional posts. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the rear additions were added, the roof was re-centered with a gently sloping pitch and wide overhanging spring eaves creating a profile typical for mid-to-late-18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch-American houses in Long Island, Staten Island and Central New Jersey. Other 18<sup>th</sup> century features which make the Van Sicklen House an excellent example of the Long Island-Central New Jersey Dutch-American house type include its one-and-a-half-story form achieved through the use of Dutch anchor beam construction, its low proportions, rectangular plan, and the location of its door and window openings, on the western half of the façade and gabled end walls. The house was occupied by the Van Sicklens and later by the family of Cornelia Van Sicklen Hicks and her husband, Thomas Hicks, until the early 1900s. In 1904, the house was acquired by realtor William E. Platt, who with his wife Isabelle, made extensive alterations, including the addition of dormer windows, incorporating decorative elements inspired by the Colonial Revival Style and the prevalent Arts and Crafts aesthetic. The Platts were responsible for popularizing the longstanding idea that this had been the ancient home of Lady Deborah. The house remains on its original site and is located across the street from the designated Gravesend-Van Sicklen Cemetery. The structure is one of the few remaining buildings that represent the early history of Gravesend, a significant New York colonial community.

## **DESCRIPTION**

### Description

Facing south, this one-and one-half story Dutch-American house was constructed in at least two campaigns during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The front section of the house dating from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century or earlier had a stone base and wood-framed gable roof. Sometime after 1750, the building was expanded at the rear with a frame addition. The present gabled roof with wide overhanging spring eaves dates from that period. Modified in 1905-06, the house also features picturesque Colonial Revival Style dormers. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the stone base and shingled gable walls were covered with non-historic facing materials. Most of the windows have been replaced with non-historic vinyl sash. The 1905-06 windows were multi-light wood casements or 12-over-12 wood sashes. An enclosed porch was added to the west side of the rear façade after 1980.

### **The Gravesend Neck Road (south) facade**

*Historic:* 18<sup>th</sup> century – low proportions typical of 18<sup>th</sup>-century buildings; rectangular plan, location of door and window openings on western half of façade; gabled roof with overhanging spring eaves; location of gable end chimneys (top portions of stacks rebuilt). 1905-06 – masonry paving slabs at front of building, small window openings with molded surrounds flanking doorway; wide horizontal window opening (originally contained two pairs 15-light casements); gabled dormers with overhanging eaves, raking cornices decorated with oversized corbels.

*Alterations:* Formstone facings, porch columns and architrave beneath porch eaves; entrance surround; metal gate; wood-and-glass door; window moldings and window sashes, roof and dormer shingles, metal mailbox, plastic-covered electric junction boxes, water pipe, metal downspouts and extensions.

### **West facade**

*Historic:* 18<sup>th</sup> century – characteristic profile of a one-and-a-half-story mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch American house with spring eaves, location and size of window openings. 1905-06 – masonry paving slab to north chimney; north chimney stack.

*Alterations:* main house – stucco on lower masonry portion of façade refaced, shingles on gable replaced with stucco; window surrounds and sash replaced; metal security grille at first-story window; through-the-wall air conditioner above first-story window; electric conduits and meter at southwest corner of façade; top portion of chimney rebuilt; non-historic chimney cap; light fixtures attached to side of chimney; shed-roofed late 20<sup>th</sup>-century enclosed porch addition faced with stucco; lit by two windows.

### **East facade**

Largely concealed by the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century building that L's around the east and north sides of the lot; historic shed-roofed kitchen wing removed for that building.

### **North (rear) facade**

*Historic:* location of doors and windows on east side of façade; gabled roof; gabled dormers with overhanging eaves, raking cornices.

*Alterations:* shingles on façade replaced with stucco; 1980s porch addition on west side of façade; window sash replaced eastern portion façade; spring eaves removed; roof shingles replaced/covered with non-historic materials.

**Site features:** Non-historic wrought-iron fence with gates at front of the property; non-historic wood picket fence around back yard; non-historic boulder lined concrete entry path at center front lawn; non-historic driveway at the western property line; non-historic concrete pavement extending from west side of house near chimney; non-historic chain link gates to rear yard on both sides of house; circular brick patio at the center of the east lawn; chain link gate between west alley and rear yard; rear yard deck.

**Other buildings on the lot:** non-historic tool shed in rear yard.

## SITE HISTORY

### Lady Deborah Moody and the Founding of Gravesend<sup>2</sup>

Gravesend's founder, Lady Deborah Moody, nee Deborah Dunch (1583?-1658/59), was born to a prominent English family that included the Bishop of Durham and Oliver Cromwell. Raised on a Berkshire estate, she received an exceptional education that culminated in study at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1606 she married Sir Henry Moody, a wealthy baronet. In addition to raising two children, Lady Moody took charge of planning the gardens and supervising alterations to her husband's manor house in Wiltshire. After Sir Henry's death in 1629, she moved to London where she became involved with a group of religious dissenters. In 1639, she and her son, Sir Henry Moody, immigrated to Massachusetts Bay where she purchased several hundred acres of land in Lynn, Massachusetts. Lady Moody's adherence to the tenets of Anabaptism (a Protestant creed, forerunner to the modern-day Mennonite religion that rejected the practice of infant baptism) brought her into conflict with the Puritan religious establishment in Massachusetts. In 1643, she and a small contingent of co-religionists left Massachusetts for New Amsterdam where they applied for a grant of land from the Dutch Director-General William Kieft. In the summer of 1643, Kieft issued a patent to Lady Moody and her followers for a vast tract of land covering much of what is today known as Coney Island, Bensonhurst, Brighton Beach, Manhattan Beach, and Midwood. Lady Moody and her followers tried to settle the land but soon were forced to withdraw due to the war Governor Kieft had provoked with the region's Native American tribes. After the war ended in 1645, a new patent was issued empowering the settlers to build a town or towns with necessary fortifications. The Gravesend town charter was the first in the New World to list a woman patentee and granted the settlers freedom of religion and the right of self-government, remarkable privileges for the period.

Gravesend was also remarkable in that it was one of the earliest villages with a rational town plan in North America. It was, according to planning historian Thomas Campanella, "only the second settlement in the English colonies laid out on an orthogonal grid and the first to include within that grid a regular distribution of public open space."<sup>3</sup> This design, which is attributed to Lady Moody, was the only town plan in the early American colonies "initiated, planned, and directed by a woman."<sup>4</sup> Lady Moody's innovative design employed a central core of four squares divided by main roads aligned on north-south and east-west axes. Narrower lanes ran around the perimeter of the village. Each village square contained ten house lots arranged around a common yard. The houses were located near the outer streets, well back from the common, to create room for garden plots. Enclosing the town center was a six foot high wood palisade with corner bastions. Outside the town center, triangular farm lots, known as planters' lots, radiated like spokes on a bicycle. Beyond the farm lots were orchards, pasture and woods.

Each of the town's 39 settlers was entitled to a house lot and corresponding farm lot, an allotment of the woodlands and pasture, and had the right to fish in the neighboring streams and along the town's beach at Coney Island. Lady Moody was allocated two lots (numbers nine and ten) with the "Loving consent and agreement of the Towne thereunto shee injoyed."<sup>5</sup>

Lady Moody built a house on her town lot (which incorporated the site of this building) where she resided until her death. In 1657 one of the first Quaker meetings in the Americas was held “at the house of Lady Moody, who managed all things with such prudence and observance of time and place as to give no offence to any person of another religion.”<sup>6</sup>

#### Seventeenth Century History of the Property

In May 1659, following Lady Moody’s death, Sir Henry Moody sold his mother’s double house lot with the associated farm lot, meadow land and wood lot to Jan Jansen Ver Ryn (aka John Johnson) for the use by Jansen’s son Abraham.<sup>7</sup> In 1663 Jansen sold Lady Moody’s former double lot with its house, gardens, orchards, etc. to Ralph Cardell, a farmer who had been one of the first settlers of Gravesend.<sup>8</sup> In 1682, shortly before his death, Cardell made a will naming his wife Elizabeth heir to all his real estate.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth subsequently married Thomas Bayles, an English-born Gravesend resident. In accordance with English law, ownership of the real estate she had inherited from her late husband passed to her new husband. In 1688/89 Bayles conveyed Lady Moody’s former dwelling and associated lots to Isaac Haselbury of Flushing, a weaver, and Richard Gregory of Gravesend.<sup>10</sup> Bayless died soon after and his widow married Haselbury in 1689. Elizabeth and Isaac Haselbury and their three children occupied the Gravesend house until 1701 when they sold their “house and garden spot” to Nicholas Stillwell, Jr.<sup>11</sup>

#### The Van Sicklens<sup>12</sup>

Ferdinandus Van Sicklen, Sr., the progenitor of the Van Sicklen family in America, was born in the Netherlands around 1635. He immigrated to New Amsterdam around 1652 and in 1660 married Eva Antonis Jansen (1641-1710), daughter of Anthony Jansen Van Salee and Grietje Reyniers.<sup>13</sup> Ferdinandus and Eva initially lived with her parents on lot 29 within the town of Gravesend. In December 1669, following Grietje Reyniers’ death, Jansen conveyed this property to his daughter and son-in-law and moved to New York City. By 1677 the Van Sicklens had moved to the nearby community of Flatlands where they were listed in the c. 1698 census, their household consisting of the two parents, five children, and four slaves. Eventually the Van Sicklens had nine children. They were living in Flatbush when Ferdinandus died in 1712.

Their third son, Ferdinandus Van Sicklen, Jr. (c. 1675-c.1737/44), who married Gertruy (Grietje) Minne Johannes c. 1698, bought Lady Moody’s house lot with its related allotment of farmland, orchards and meadowland in Gravesend from Nicholas Stillwell, Jr., in 1702.<sup>14</sup> In 1709 Ferdinandus Van Sicklen, Jr. was one of 42 individuals who appeared on “A List of Names and Estates of Persons belonging to the Town of Gravesend.”<sup>15</sup> In 1731 a list of the inhabitants of Gravesend and their taxable estates indicated that he was the owner of 62 acres of land, three horses, and five cattle.<sup>16</sup> Like many of the farmers in Kings County at that time, he was a slave owner, with two slaves listed in his household in the census of 1731. Ferdinandus died sometime between 1737, when he made his will, and 1744, when it was probated. He left his entire estate to his wife during her lifetime, with the proviso that his real estate in Gravesend was to pass to his sons Ferdinandus and Minne after Gertruy’s death and that they were to pay cash annuities to their six sisters.<sup>17</sup> The earliest portion of the house likely dates to Ferdinandus Van Sicklen Jr’s ownership of the property. Ultimately, the Van Sicklens’

eldest son, Ferdinandus (c.1709/15-c.17?) gained title to his parents' home and farm while Minne (c. 1716-1784), presumably with his interests bought out by his brother, settled in Oyster Bay.<sup>18</sup>

Ferdinandus Van Sicklen (3) married Maria Van Nuyse (c. 1707/16-?),<sup>19</sup> sister of Joost Van Nuyse, builder of the Joost and Elizabeth Van Nuyse House at 128 East 34<sup>th</sup> in Flatlands, a designated New York City Landmark. Like his father, Ferdinandus was a farmer. He was a prominent figure in the Gravesend community, serving at various times as a tax assessor, surveyor, church master, and overseer of the poor. Ferdinandus died sometime between 1761 and 1766.<sup>20</sup> His property passed to his widow Maria Van Nuyse Van Sicklen who continued to occupy this house until her death, which probably occurred in the early 1780s.<sup>21</sup> The house was probably expanded during this period.

In recent years, genealogist Richard McCool has argued convincingly that Ferdinandus (3) and Maria had a son Ferdinandus (4), born. c. 1738.<sup>22</sup> A farmer and fisherman, Ferdinandus Van Sicklen (4) obtained a license to marry Cornelia Lozier (aka Lazear or Laugier) in 1768. Their first child, a son named Ferdinand, was baptized in 1770 at the Reformed Dutch Church at Gravesend.<sup>23</sup> Ferdinandus and Cornelia had three sons and three daughters by 1790 when the first Federal census was taken.<sup>24</sup> Town records reveal that Ferdinandus was active in the municipal affairs of Gravesend, serving in a variety of posts. He and a kinsman, Abraham Van Sicklen, served with the Loyalist militia during the Revolutionary War, although both men were suspected of sympathizing with the rebels by their captain who nevertheless noted that they continued to do their duty.<sup>25</sup> Like his ancestors, Ferdinandus Van Sicklen was a slave owner, with four slaves residing in his household in 1790.

Ferdinandus Van Sicklen (4) died in 1800.<sup>26</sup> Cornelia Van Sicklen continued to occupy this house and run the family farm with the help of her two surviving sons John (1775-1842) and Abraham (1784-1841) and the slaves.<sup>27</sup> Cornelia Van Sicklen seems to have died in the first part of 1809, after which her husband's estate passed to her sons John and Abraham and their sister Maria (1773-1832), wife of Cornelius Antonides.<sup>28</sup> In June 1809, the heirs entered into an agreement that conveyed half of their late father's property to Abraham, including the western half of his homestead lot and this house which was divided at a partition wall.<sup>29</sup> Both John and Abraham married and had families who occupied the two halves of this house in the 1810s and 1820s.<sup>30</sup> In 1841-42 Abraham's daughter Cornelia and her husband Thomas Hicks, a fisherman, acquired the western part of the house from Abraham's heirs. John Van Sicklen resided in his half of the house until his death in 1842. He left a lifetime interest in his share of the house to his wife Maria Johnson Van Sicklen, indicating that it was to pass after her death to their sons Ferdinand and Court Van Sicklen. In the summer of 1849, Maria, her son Ferdinand, and his wife and children died in a cholera epidemic.<sup>31</sup> In 1852 Cornelia and Thomas Hicks purchased the eastern half of the house from John Van Sicklen's remaining heirs. They and, after their deaths, their children occupied the house, then popularly known as "the Hicks mansion" until 1903.<sup>32</sup>

### The Van Sicklen House and Eighteenth-Century Dutch American Houses<sup>33</sup>

Although this house occupies a portion of Lady Moody's house lot, most architectural historians agree with Rosalie Bailey, that Lady Moody's home "was

undoubtedly in an earlier house than the present one, which, although of great age, belongs to a later period.”<sup>34</sup>

Based on a preliminary structural analysis conducted by Robert Silman Associates in 2005, the Van Sicklen House seems to have been built in at least two sections.<sup>35</sup> Dating from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, likely during the ownership of Ferdinandus, Jr. or perhaps earlier, the earliest section of the house was probably a two-room, one-and-a-half-story house with four stone bearing walls. The front and side walls of this original house frame out the current structure. The rear wall of the original house is now buried in a partition between the original house and the rear addition. Only one-room-deep, the house would have been symmetrical about the fireplaces and would have been capped by a steeply pitched gabled roof. Photographs of the house taken prior to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century alterations, show that the doorway and west windows of the façade, and the south windows on the first-story gable walls, retain their original positions. Inside the house an interior partition to the west of the staircase (visible in the interior view of the house published in 1909) separated the rooms.<sup>36</sup> The ceilings of these rooms (converted to one large living room by the Platts and now reconfigured) are articulated by massive widely-spaced beams, known as anchor beams or bents, a key element of Dutch construction.

Behind the stone portion of the Van Sicklen House is a frame wing, built in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It seems plausible, though by no means certain, that this addition might have coincided with Ferdinandus Van Sicklen’s marriage to Cornelia Lozier in 1768. The earliest photographs for this portion of the house date from 1923, after the Platt’s alterations, and undoubtedly reflect their interventions; however, it seems likely that the asymmetrical arrangement of the first-story doors and windows reflects the 18<sup>th</sup>-century configuration and may result from the eastern and western portions of the rear wing being added at different times. In any case, with the new frame addition or the second addition (if the wing was built in stages), the roof was reframed to extend over the entire house, with the ridge line moved back and the front-room chimneys rebuilt at an angle to “creep” toward the apex of the new roof.<sup>37</sup>

It is interesting to note that when all of the sections of the Van Sicklen House had been completed, its 42 x 31 feet footprint conformed to an apparent module for mid to late eighteenth century houses. Although they differ in plan from this house, the main block of the Adrian and Ann Wyckoff Onderdonk House (built c. third quarter eighteenth century, a designated New York City Landmark) at 1820-1836 Flushing Avenue, Queens, measuring roughly 43 x 34 feet; the main block of the Nicholas Schenck House (c.1771, originally in Flatlands moved to the Brooklyn Museum) measuring roughly 42 x 33 feet; and the main block of the Dyckman House (c. 1785, a designated New York City Landmark), at Broadway and West 240<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, measuring roughly 44 x 30 feet; are almost identical in size to the Van Sicklen House. Like these houses, the Van Sicklen House probably also had an 18<sup>th</sup>-century kitchen wing that was replaced by the shed roofed kitchen seen in historic photos of the house. (The 19<sup>th</sup>-century wing was demolished in the mid-twentieth century.)

Moreover, the present house, although altered, retains the characteristic roof form and profile of a Dutch-American farmhouse dating from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It is representative of a sub-regional building type found in western Long Island, Staten Island, and Monmouth County, New Jersey, quite different from the 18<sup>th</sup> century houses of the middle and upper Hudson River valley or northern New Jersey, where masonry

traditions prevailed. In Brooklyn and the other areas of the sub-region, Dutch-American colonial houses were usually wood-framed, one-and-a-half-story, shingle-covered structures with low pitched gable-ended roofs that came down in gracefully curving projecting eaves, often called spring eaves or overshot eaves, that extended in front and sometimes in back of the house. This type of eave probably was inspired by similar overhangs on Flemish houses that protected the soft stucco facings commonly used on exterior walls. In America where spring eaves were used on frame houses their primary purpose may have been to provide shelter for the entrances and shade in summertime.

The earliest form of the Long Island-Central New Jersey house type may be seen in the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House (c. 1652 and later, a designated New York City Landmark). Over the next century and a half the building type evolved as houses became larger and more complex in plan and structure. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century they began to incorporate features from contemporary Anglo-American sources including center hall “Georgian” plans, corner fireplaces, and gambrel roofs. Sometimes they gained a porch when posts were installed to support the spring eaves that might extend as much as five feet beyond the front wall.

In 1945, historian Maud Esther Dillard, who was concerned that the Dutch, Huguenot and Walloon colonists who first settled in the towns on the western end of Long Island, “not be forgotten in the hurly-burly of twentieth-century Brooklyn,” cataloged the remaining Dutch houses in Brooklyn.<sup>38</sup> At that time she documented forty such structures in Brooklyn. Today the Van Sicklen House is one of a small number of Dutch-American houses surviving in Brooklyn.<sup>39</sup> Within this group, the Van Sicklen House has a number of special distinctions. With the exception of portions of the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House, Jan Martense Schenck House (c. 1675 and later, installed in the Brooklyn Museum, 1964), and perhaps the Lott House (east wing, 1720), it probably has the earliest surviving fabric in any of the Dutch-American houses in Brooklyn and it is the only known extant 18<sup>th</sup>-century house largely of stone construction in Brooklyn.

#### The Van Sicklen House and Stone Construction

There had been a tradition of stone construction in Brooklyn in the 17<sup>th</sup> century similar to that of the Upper Hudson River Valley. Among the most notable examples were the stone house of Jacob Swaert later incorporated as a wing in the eighteenth century Van Brunt House, formerly at 1752 84<sup>th</sup> Street in New Utrecht, and the Vechte-Cortelyou House (c. 1699, known popularly as the Old Stone House) in Gowanus which was replicated in Carroll Park in 1934. Stone houses were also built in Brooklyn in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in areas adjacent to ridges where stone was available, but they were far less common than frame houses. Among the known examples are the Van Sicklen house, the Duryea house on Newtown Creek, just off of Meeker Avenue in Greenpoint, the Rapelye farmhouse at Cripplebush Road near Marcy Avenue in Williamsburg, the Van Pelt house at 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 81st Street in New Utrecht, and the Cornell-Schenck house at Jamaica Avenue near Cleveland Street (built 1765, altered 1792). Except for the Van Sicklen House and the Onderdonk House, which because of a boundary change is now in Queens, all the above have been demolished. Interestingly, the Van Sicklen House, the Van Pelt house, and Cornell-Schenck house are examples of mixed construction with stone used for façade and a portion of the side walls but not for the rear of the house. This may have been done for structural reasons, at the Van Sicklen

House the stone walls are used for the large front chambers while the frame portions of the house contain relatively small rooms, or for reasons of economy, since stone construction is much more expensive than frame construction.

There are also a number of 18<sup>th</sup>-century houses of stone construction in the other boroughs. In the Bronx these include the Frederick Van Cortlandt (1748-49) and Isaac Valentine Houses (1758), both examples of the English tradition of construction, and the Hadley House, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch-American farmhouse with 19<sup>th</sup>-century additions remodeled by Dwight James Baum in 1915-16 at 5122 Post Road (all three are designated New York City Landmarks). In Queens, in addition to the Onderdonk House, the Abraham Lent House at 78-03 19<sup>th</sup> Road, Steinway, one of the few structures in the borough built in the Dutch tradition, has a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century stone section. On Staten Island, where stone is plentiful, examples include the Christopher House (c. 1720, addition 1730) at Richmondtown, the Tysen-Neville House (c. 1800) at 806 Richmond Terrace, and the Peter Housman House (c. 1730 stone section, c. 1760 frame addition), at 308 St. John Avenue, and the Lakeman-Cortelyou House on Richmond Road in New Dorp (c. 1715?).

#### The Platts and Turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-Century Changes to the House

A few years after Cornelia Hick's death in 1896, one of her heirs sued for a distribution of the assets in the estate. At a court-ordered auction of her real estate in November 1904, a real estate developer, William E. Platt, whose wife Isabelle (Belle) had become enamored with "the delightful, rambling old house,"<sup>40</sup> was the highest bidder for this property.<sup>41</sup> In March 1905, Platt filed plans with Brooklyn Department of Buildings to modify the house by installing new windows and a door, naming himself as architect for the alterations.<sup>42</sup> William and Isabelle Platt actually made extensive alterations to the house in keeping with the prevalent Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Believing or wishing the house was Lady Moody's former home, many of the Platt's alterations were based on New England and English sources then being popularized by pioneers of the Colonial Revival design such as furniture-manufacturer and house-restorer Wallace Nutting. As detailed by Isabelle Platt in an article published in *Country Life in America*, these changes included replacing the old moss covered roof "with a new roof of cedar shingles."<sup>43</sup> The first-story stone walls, which had received several coats of plaster and paint that was scaling, were "scraped and covered with a rough grouting of Portland cement. Because the house had only a small cellar, measuring 12 x 12 feet,<sup>44</sup> the ground floor planking and the roughly-hewn oak floor beams, "hard and bent with age," were removed and a new cellar was excavated. A new basement furnace was vented by a new chimney "built entirely on the outside of the house." A long "English casement" window "set in solid oak timbers" was installed on the east side of the façade. In addition small square windows were created on either side of the entry and the windows on the west side of the façade were enlarged. The front door was replaced with a Dutch door that is now in the collection of the Gravesend Historical Society. At the second story, dormers with multi-pane casement windows were installed on both the front and rear facades. The changes to the first story of the rear façade were less extensive but some of the window sash was probably replaced with Colonial Revival style multi-pane sash.

Prior to the Platts having acquired it, there was little if any association made between this house and Lady Moody. In her article, Isabelle Platt claimed that workmen discovered ancient coins, a package of colonial money, “two old pewter mugs and a brass tankard” in excavating the cellar. Her article also claimed that “among some dusty papers in the attic was discovered a written account of the history of the house ... in writing so faded as to be barely legible.” From that she “with great difficulty made the following notes:”

*This house, known as “ye Bowerie of Lady Moody,” was erected about 1643 on land that was part of a grant received from the Dutch Director General, Governor Kieft.*

Isabelle Platt’s charming tale and the handsome alterations the Platts made to their house won popular support from the press and architectural writers. Aymar Embury in the *Dutch Colonial House; Its Origin, Design, Modern Plan and Construction* (1913) and Elsie Lathrop in *Historic Houses of America* (1935) accepted the association with Lady Moody and praised the Platts’ “restoration.” The *Brooklyn Eagle* began to carry photos of the house identifying it as Lady Moody’s home. Several local historians took issue with the Platts’ claims<sup>45</sup> and architectural historians Rosalie Bailey and Maude Dillard both insisted that this house, in its present condition, could not have been Lady Moody’s home. Nevertheless, Mrs. Platt’s romantic stories continued to seize the public’s imagination and the house is still popularly known as the “Lady Moody House.”

#### Subsequent History<sup>46</sup>

In 1913 William E. Platt sold this house to Bert M. Cole. Cole, an accountant for the City of New York occupied the house with his sister Carlotta, an actress, known professionally as Charlotte Townsend. She was probably the connection that led to this house being photographed c. 1914 for a slide that appeared in a Warner Brothers short, *The Nickette* in 1932.<sup>47</sup> Cole kept the house for ten years selling it in 1923 to Annie Anderson, an English immigrant who later claimed to have encountered the ghostly presence of Lady Moody in the house. Historic photographs show that Mrs. Anderson was responsible for installing wood columns under the front eaves sometime during the 1930s (These were subsequently replaced by the present columns.) By 1944, Mrs. Anderson was in financial difficulties and the house was in danger of demolition. In 1946, it became Charles and Frank Trapani VFW Post, named in honor of two twin brothers who had been killed in World War II.<sup>48</sup> The following year, Annie Anderson sold the house to Elizabeth and Allan W. Johnson. In 1954, Elizabeth Johnson put the house on the market. It had excited the interest of Nunzio Maisano, a nearby resident who worked as a riveter at the Brooklyn shipyards of the Bethlehem Steel Company.<sup>49</sup> When the property was purchased in 1955 by the Greater New York Building Company, which intended to demolish the house, Maisano succeeded in persuading the developer to sell him the house and a 51 x 100 feet lot, which would permit him to have a front and back yard. Two months after he acquired the house, a kitchen fire in the upstairs apartment damaged newly renovated second floor rooms, the garret and the roof, requiring Maisano to re clad the roof with asphalt shingles. In the late 1950s, Maisano also had the façade refaced with Formstone and replaced most of the windows. In 1973, Nunzio Maisano’s widow Mae Maisano conveyed the house to her son-in-law Joseph Solmo. It remained in the ownership of the Solmo family until 2005.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This item was previously heard on February 8, 1966, (LP-0174)) and May 26, 1970 (LP-0174).

<sup>2</sup> This Information about the development of Gravesend is based on Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Old Gravesend Cemetery Designation Report* (LP-0921), (New York: City of New York, 1976); Thomas J. Campanella, "Sanctuary in the Wilderness: Deborah Moody and the Town Plan for Colonial Gravesend," *Landscape Journal* 12 (Fall 1993), 106-130; Victor Cooper, *A Dangerous Woman: New York's First Lady Liberty: The Life and Times of Lady Deborah Moody* (Bowie MD: Heritage Books, 1995); Eric Ierardi, *Gravesend the Home of Coney Island* (New York: Vantage Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Campanella, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, 137.

<sup>7</sup> New York City Municipal Archives, Town Records of Kings Co., Gravesend, reel 61, vol. 2, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, vol. 2, p. 153. In the 1630s Cardell and Gravesend founder Nicholas Stillwell had been partners in a tobacco plantation on Manhattan Island near Turtle Bay. Cardell and another partner, Christoffel Laurens, also farmed tobacco at Gowanus prior to his settling in Gravesend. See Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Kings County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 2, p. 89a.

<sup>10</sup> Conveyances Liber 2, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Conveyances Liber 3, p. 11. Nicholas Stillwell, Jr. is now commonly known to genealogists as Nicholas Stillwell III, being the grandson of Gravesend founder Nicholas Stillwell I. Nicholas III was the son of Captain Nicholas Stillwell. He was born sometime after 1671, resided in Gravesend, and died in 1715. John E. Stillwell, *Stillwell Genealogy* (New York: printed privately, 1929), v. 2, 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> This section on the Van Sicklen genealogy is largely based on two unpublished manuscripts, one on the Van Sicklen family the other on the Duryea-Duryee family, by Richard McCool who generously made these materials available to me in 2005 through Harry Macy, Jr., then of the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society. Joseph Ditta, Jr. also made his genealogical study "Descendants of John and Maria (Johnson) Van Sicklen of Gravesend, Brooklyn, New York," 2004 available to the Commission. Other sources include Rosalie Fellows Bailey, *Pre-Revolutionary Dutch Houses and Families in Northern New Jersey and Southern New York* (New York: Holland Society and William Morrow & Co., 1936), 60; Maud Esther Dillard, *Old Dutch Houses of Brooklyn* (New York: Richard E. Smith, 1945), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Jansen Van Salee, known as the Turk, was the son of a Dutch seaman turned pirate in the employ of the sultan of Morocco. Raised in Morocco and the son of Jan Jansen's second Moroccan wife, Jansen returned to Amsterdam as a young man where he became engaged to Grietje Reyniers, a widow. The couple married aboard ship bound for New Amsterdam in 1630. After settling in the city, Jansen became a prosperous farmer and businessman but he earned a reputation for quarrelsomeness and drunkenness. In 1639 the couple was expelled from New Amsterdam. Jansen obtained a patent for a tract

of land that included the site of the future town of New Utrecht where he settled with his family. In 1660, at a time when the government feared another Indian uprising, Jansen sold his patent to Nicholas Stillwell (I) and moved to lot No. 29 within the town of Gravesend. See Hazel Van Dyke Roberts, "Anthony Janse Van Salee 1607-1676," *New York Genealogical & Biographical Society Record [NYG&BS Record]*, 103, 16-18; Francis Ferraro, "Re Anthony Jansen Van Salee," posting Jan 1, 2002 at [genforum.genealogy.com/morocco/messages/167.html](http://genforum.genealogy.com/morocco/messages/167.html); "Anthony Janse van Salee and van Vaes of New Amsterdam and Long Island," at [www.geocities.com/dane97520/VanSalee.html](http://www.geocities.com/dane97520/VanSalee.html); Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Bailey (p. 60) and Dillard (p. 7) both cite a 1702 deed that probably was part of the old Gravesend Town Records. Unfortunately the 1702-04 deed Liber for Gravesend was not microfilmed and may now be lost.

<sup>15</sup> Gravesend Town Records, reel 105.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> New York County, Office of the Surrogate, Wills Liber 15, p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> Letters of Administration for the estate of Minne Van Sicklen, yeoman of Oyster Bay, were granted to his son Ferdinand in May 1784. See New York Historical Society, *Collections*, Abstracts of 1903.

<sup>19</sup> McCool calculates that Maria Magdalena Van Nuyse, daughter of Magdalena Duryea and William Jacobse Van Nuyse, aka William Okie, was born sometime between 1707 and 1716, Duryea Manuscript, 23, 74.

<sup>20</sup> The last mention of Ferdinandus (3) in the Gravesend town records seems to be his appointment as churchmaster in April 1761; in June 1766 "widow Van Sicklen" received an allotment of land at Plum Beach Island that was being divided among the freeholders of Gravesend, Gravesend Town Records reel 143, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> The last record for Maria Van Sicklen seems to be a notation that she stood alone as the witness to the baptism of her grandson Wilhelmus at the New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church in 1781, McCool, Duryea manuscript, 192.

<sup>22</sup> McCool also records two daughters: Magdalena (b.1734/35), who died young, and Geertje (b 1735/36-1817), who married Wilhelmus Ryder in 1754 and resided in Gravesend on the same block as this house. Wilhelmus and Ferdinandus (4) seem to have been close friends. Wilhelmus was the witness when Ferdinandus obtained his license to marry, both Ferdinandus and Cornelia and Geertje and Wilhelmus were witnesses to one another's children's baptisms, and Ferdinandus was one of the executor's of Wilhelmus's will. See McCool, Duryea manuscript, p. 75, 187-189; New York Historical Society, *Collections*, Abstracts of Wills-Liber 34, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Churchbook of the Reformed Dutch Church of J. Christ at Gravesend, p. 151 @ [olivetreegenealogy.com/nn/church/gravesend3.shtml](http://olivetreegenealogy.com/nn/church/gravesend3.shtml); McCool, Duryea manuscript, p.191. Cornelia, "Wife of Vanant Sickler" [sic], was named in her father, Johannes Lazear's [sic] will in 1774. See Bergen County NJ Archives Wills, Lazear, Johannes May 11, 1774 @ <http://www.usgarchives.net/nj/njfiles.htm> accessed Sept. 11, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> United States, Census of 1790, New York State, Kings County, Gravesend, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Scott, "Loyalists and Doubtful Men of Kings County, 1777," *NYB&G Record* 105 (Apr. 1974), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand was chosen as poundmaster at a town meeting in April 1800; later that year when the census was taken and his widow was listed as the head of the household. See Gravesend Town Records reel 143, p. 71; United States, Census 1800, Gravesend, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> The 1805 list of taxable inhabitants of Gravesend indicated that the widow Cornelia Van Sicklen was the owner of 10 cows and six horses. Stillwell, *Genealogies*, 246.

<sup>28</sup> Cornelia Van Sicklen must have passed away prior to April 1809, when her sons, rather than she, registered the birth of a daughter, “Mordelena” to their slave “Maree.” Gravesend Records, Slave Births and School Records, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Conveyance Liber 99, p. 469. Maria and Cornelius Antonides sold her dower right to the estate to Abraham for \$625. John released his interest in the property to Abraham for \$1.

<sup>30</sup> By 1830, the western portion of the house, which had belonged to Abraham Van Sicklen, was being leased. United States Census, 1840, Kings County, New York, Gravesend, 406.

<sup>31</sup> They were buried in the small family cemetery John Van Sicklen had established across the street from this house (the Van Sicklen Cemetery and the adjoining Gravesend Cemetery are designated New York City Landmarks).

<sup>32</sup> “Gravesend Notes,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov. 19, 1899, 35.

<sup>33</sup> This section on Dutch American architecture is based on Clifford W. Zink, “Dutch Framed Houses in New York and New Jersey,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 22 (Winter 1987), 265-294; David Steven Cohen, *The Dutch-American Farm* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Roderic H. Blackburn, *Dutch Colonial Homes in America* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002); John R. Stevens, *Dutch Vernacular Architecture in North America (1640-1830)* (West Hurley, New York: Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Bailey, 61. While there appears to be a first period house at the core of this building, it seems very probable that if it were Lady Moody’s house it would have been constructed with English rather than Dutch structural techniques and would resemble the early timber-framed houses of Massachusetts. For the most part the original settlers of Gravesend were New Englanders and like the English settlers of New England and eastern Long Island it is probable that they would have followed English building traditions. However, it should be noted that there has been only the most preliminary of structural evaluations of this house and without a scientific examination of the fabric of the house it is impossible to make an absolute determination as to its age. For houses built on English traditions see Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay 1625-1725* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Joan Berkey, *Early Architecture of Cape May County, New Jersey: The Heavy Timber Frame Legacy* (Cape May Court House, NJ: Cape May County Historical and Genealogical Society, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Silman Associates, P.C. Consulting Engineers to NY Landmarks Conservancy, September 26, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> A large portion of the western wall extending from the west side of the staircase has been removed. Descriptions of interior features of the house are solely for the purposes of historic and architectural analysis; none of the interior is part of this designation.

<sup>37</sup> This re-centering of a chimney to accommodate a new roof when a house was enlarged from one to two-rooms deep also occurred at the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House. See Blackburn, 40-41.

<sup>38</sup> Dillard, Foreword.

<sup>39</sup> These houses are sometimes called “Dutch Colonial,” although almost all the buildings post-date the Dutch colonial period and the building type reached its peak after the American Revolution.

<sup>40</sup> Isabelle Platt, “An Old Colonial Homestead Born Again,” *Country Life in America*, June 1909, 207.

<sup>41</sup> Conveyances, Sec. 21, Liber 18, p. 258.

<sup>42</sup> Brooklyn Dept. of Buildings, Alt 441-1905 recorded in the *Real Estate Record & Guide, Brooklyn Ed.*, Mar. 5, 1905, 321.

<sup>43</sup> Platt, 207-08, 218, 220.

<sup>44</sup> The original cellar was located beneath one of the rear rooms in the northeast corner of the house.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Charles Andrew Ditmas, “Lady Deborah Moody,” *Bulletin of the Long Island Historical Society*, April 1913.

<sup>46</sup> This section is based on Conveyances Liber 3335, p. 510; Liber 4358, p. 197; Liber 7097, p. 80; Liber 8336, p. 566, 570; Liber 8347, p. 108; ACRIS, block 7123, lot 64; Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection, photographs, Moody House, 27 Neck Road; Brooklyn Historical Society, Photographic Collection, Moody House, 27 Gravesend Neck Road, Gravesend.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Ditta, who was responsible for finding this early connection with film history, speculates that Carlotta Cole may have been connected with Vitagraph Studios. See “That Time Lady Moody’s House Was In a Movie,” *The Gravesend Gazette*, Sept. 13, 2015 @ <http://gravesendgazette.com/2015/09/2013/that-time-lady-moodys-house-was-in-a-movie>, accessed Mar. 23, 2016; “Charlotte Townsend,” *The Vaudeville Mirror*, Mar. 6, 1909, 9; “Screen Club Dinner,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Feb. 19, 1913, 27; United States Census, 1920, Kings County, New York, Enumeration Dist. 980, p. 5A.

<sup>48</sup> “Historic Moody Mansion Now Houses Veteran Post,” *World Telegram & Sun*, Sept. 15, 1946.

<sup>49</sup> “Moody House to Stay,” *New York Times*, Dec. 12, 1955, 5; “About New York—Brooklyn Shipyard Worker Gets His Dream House, a 300-Year-Old Landmark,” *NYT*, Sept. 19, 1956, 41.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Van Sicklen House is among the oldest surviving Dutch-American houses in Brooklyn and the only known extant 18<sup>th</sup> century house largely of stone construction in the borough; that located in the northwest quadrant of the historic town center of Gravesend, the house is linked to the earliest colonial history of Brooklyn in that it occupies part of the house lot of Lady Deborah Moody who founded Gravesend in the 1640s; that it appears to be one of the earliest surviving houses in Brooklyn and New York City; that in 1702, farmer and property owner, Ferdinandus Van Sicklen, Jr., acquired this land; that members of the Van Sicklen family were probably responsible for constructing the house, which was built in sections, beginning in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps earlier, and for expanding it in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Van Sicklens who occupied this house were farmers and prominent members of the Gravesend community serving in a variety of municipal and institutional posts; that in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the rear additions were added, the roof was re-centered with a gently sloping pitch and wide overhanging spring eaves creating a profile typical for mid-to-late-18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch-American houses in Long Island, Staten Island and Central New Jersey; that other 18<sup>th</sup> century features which make the Van Sicklen House an excellent example of the Long Island-Central New Jersey Dutch-American house type include its one-and-a-half-story form achieved through the use of Dutch anchor beam construction, its low proportions, rectangular plan, and the location of its door and window openings, on the western half of the façade and gabled end walls; that the house was occupied by the Van Sicklens and later by the family of Cornelia Van Sicklen Hicks and her husband, Thomas Hicks, until the early 1900s; that in 1904, the house was acquired by realtor William E. Platt, who with his wife Isabelle, made extensive alterations, including the addition of dormer windows, incorporating decorative elements inspired by the Colonial Revival Style and the prevalent Arts and Crafts aesthetic; that the Platts were responsible for popularizing the longstanding idea that this had been the ancient home of Lady Deborah that the house remains on its original site and is located across the street from the designated Gravesend-Van Sicklen Cemetery; that the structure is one of the few remaining buildings that represent the early history of Gravesend, a significant New York colonial community.

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 Van Sicklen House, 27 Gravesend Neck Road, Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 7123, Lot 64, as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

Frederick Bland, Diana Chapin, Wellington Chen, Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, John Gustafsson, Kim Vauss, Commissioners



Van Sicklen House  
27 Gravesend Neck Road  
Brooklyn Tax Map Block 7123, Lot 64  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016*



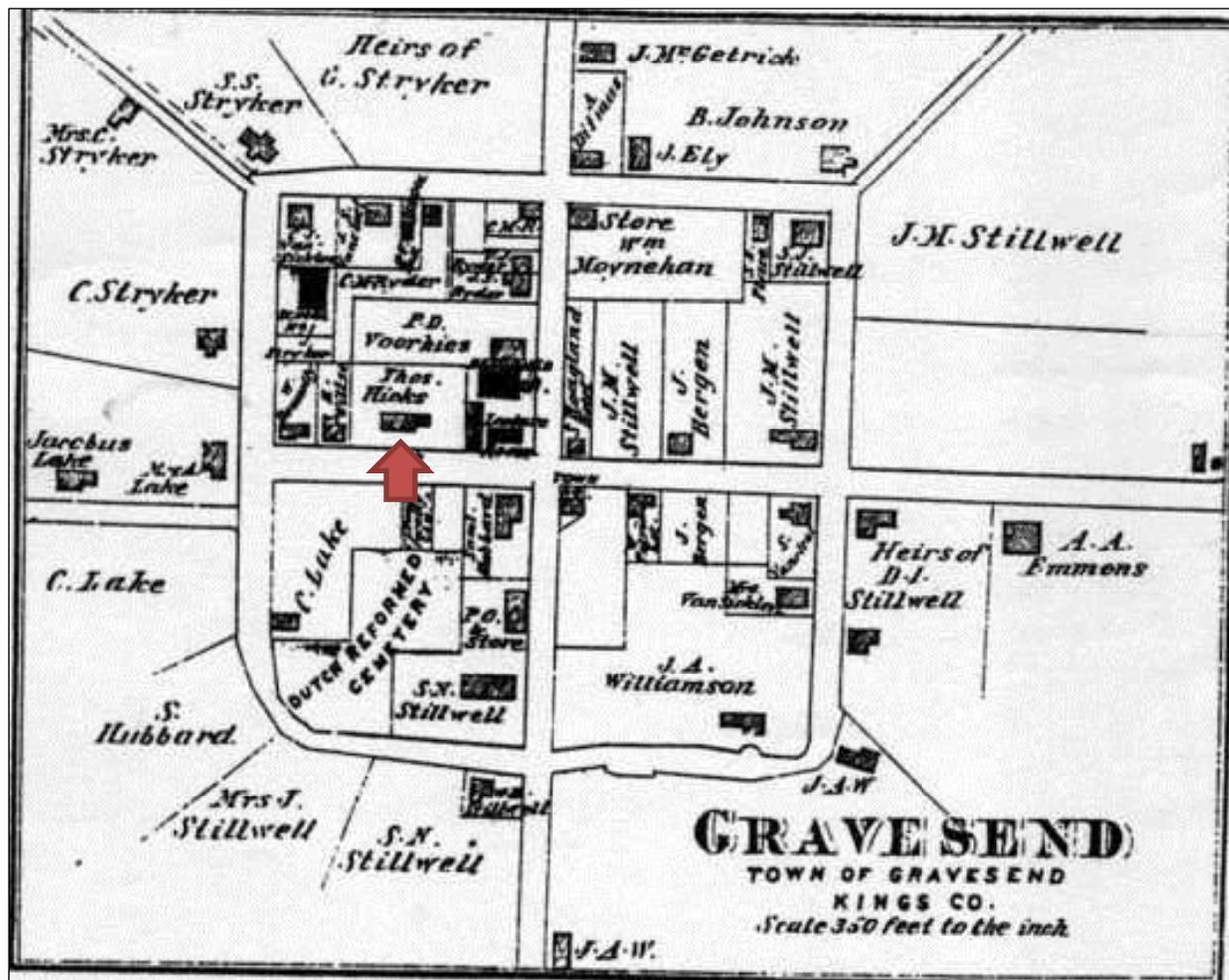
Van Sicklen House  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016*



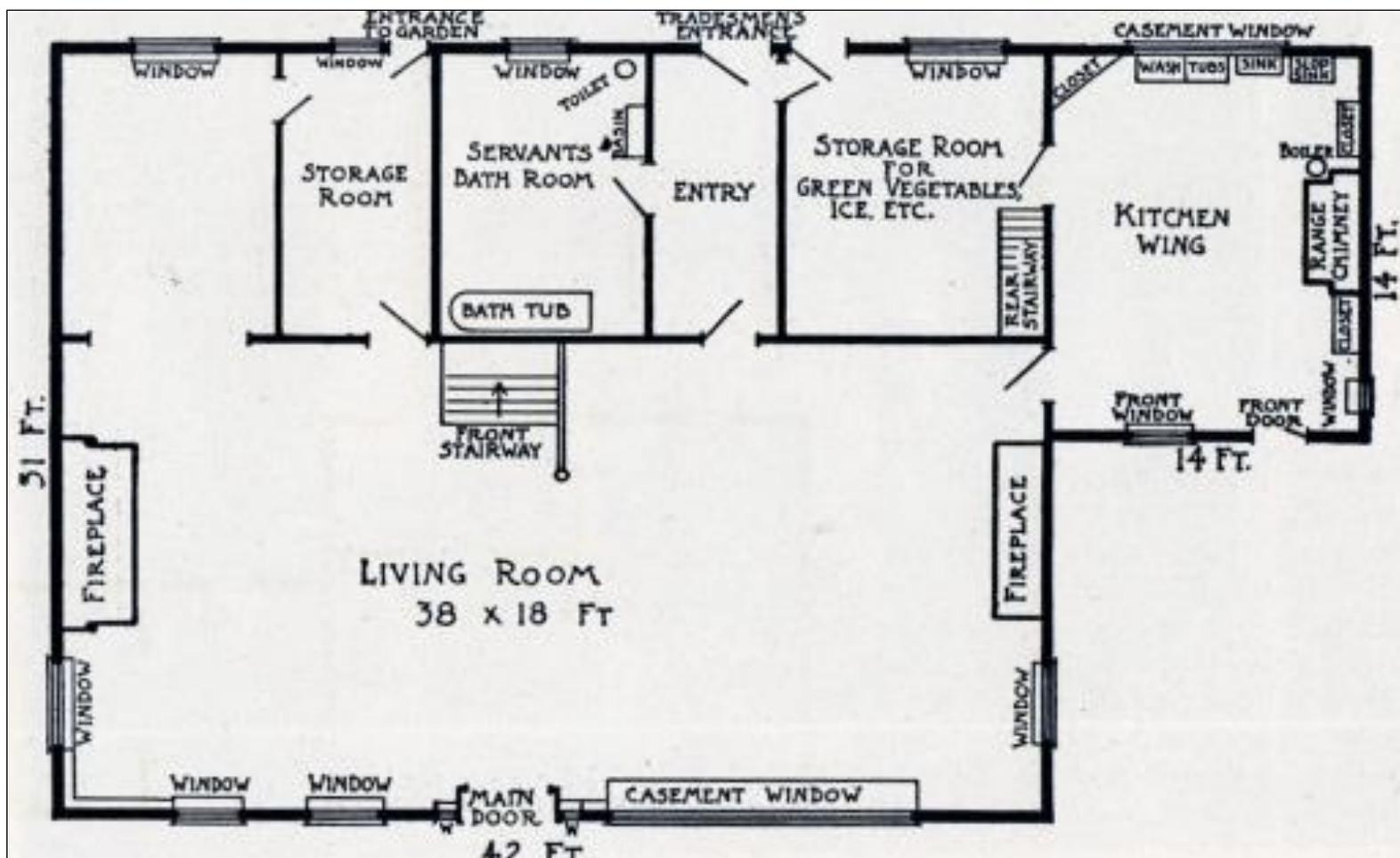
Van Sicklen House  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2016*



Van Sicklen House  
*Photo: Gale Harris, 2016*



Map of Gravesend in 1873  
 Showing the location of the Van Sicklen House, later Thomas and Cornelia Van Sicklen Hicks House  
 Source: Beer's Atlas of Long Island, 1873



Plan of the Van Sicklen House, c. 1905-06

The oldest portion of the house dating from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, or earlier, with stone bearing walls is contained within the living room

The rear rooms, of frame construction, appear to date from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century

The (now demolished) kitchen wing probably dated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and likely replaced an earlier kitchen

Source: "An Old Colonial Homestead Born Again," *Country Life in America*, June 1909

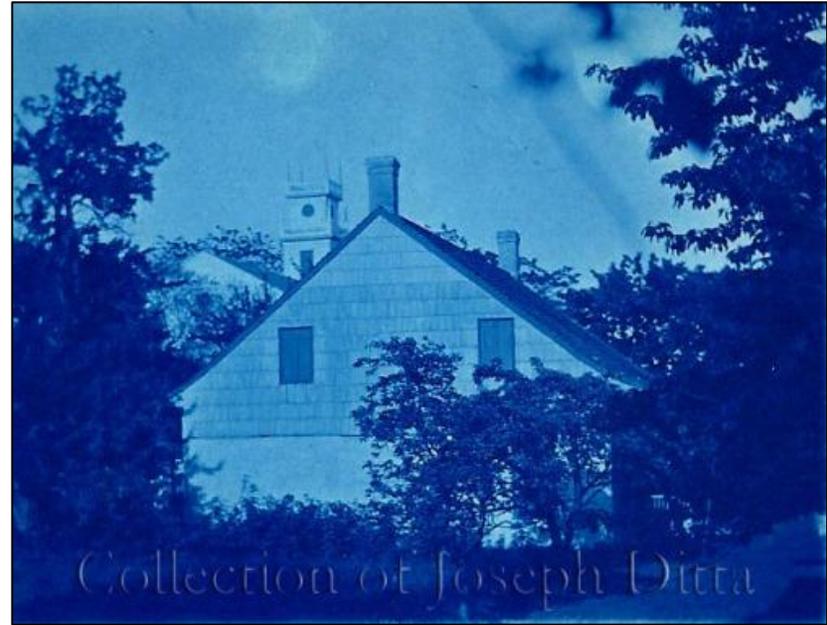


William E. Platt, Interior view of Van Sicklen House  
Showing the old partition walls and massive ceiling beams in the oldest portion of the house  
(None of the interior is included in this designation)

*Photo Source: "An Old Colonial Homestead Born Again," Country Life in America, June 1909*



Charles W. Bauhan, "Wash-Day, Gravesend, L.I. Sep. 4/93"  
*Source: Collection of Joseph Ditta*



Cyanotype photograph showing the west gable wall  
of the Van Sicklen House, June 1893  
*Photo Source: Collection of Joseph Ditta*



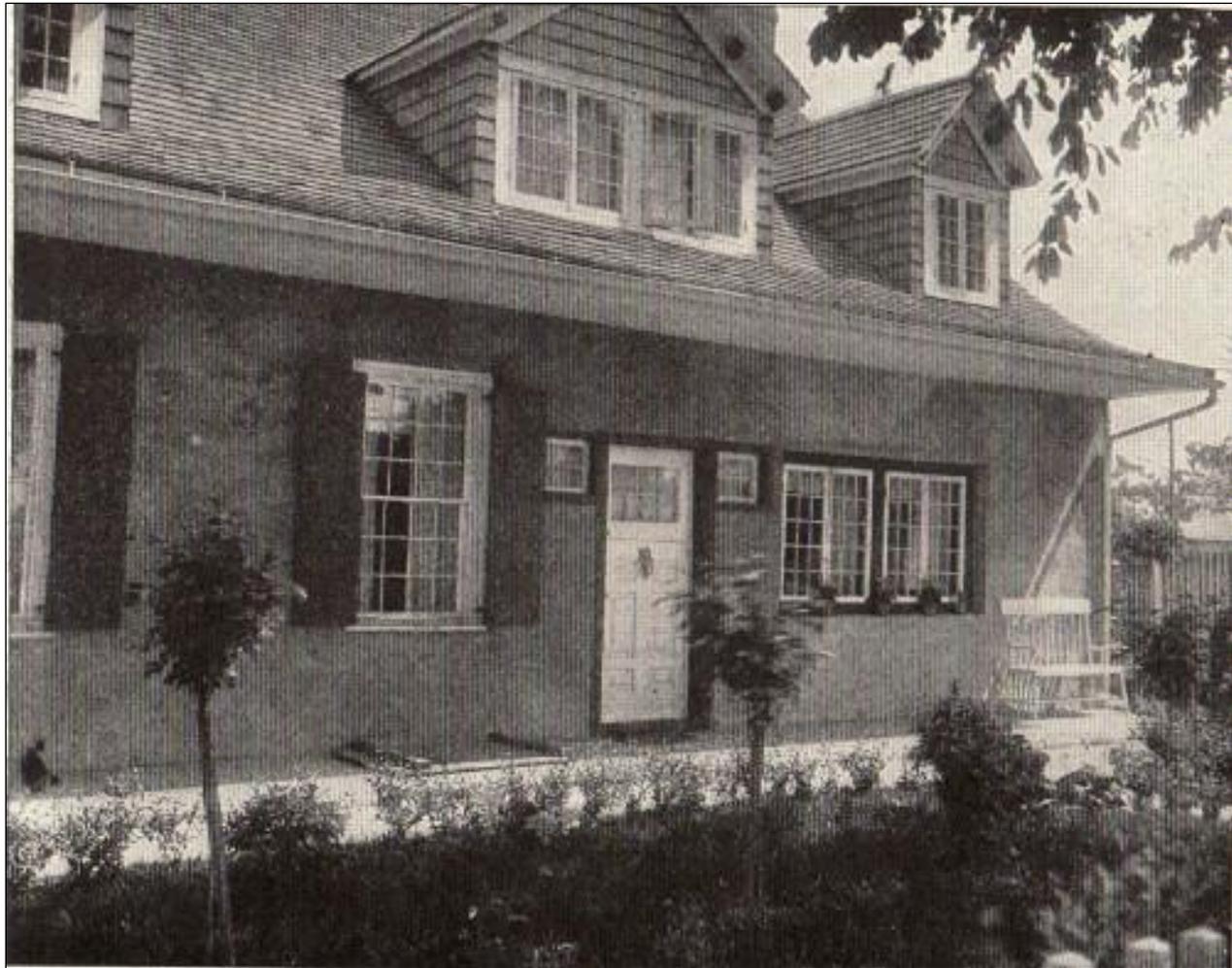
George W. Nash, Photograph of the Van Sicklen House  
Taken July 16, 1903, a few years prior to the Platts' alterations

*Photo Source: New-York Historical Society, Department of Prints, Photographs, and Architectural Collections*



William E. Platt, Photograph of the Van Sicklen House

*Photo Source: "An Old Colonial Homestead Born Again," Country Life in America, June 1909*

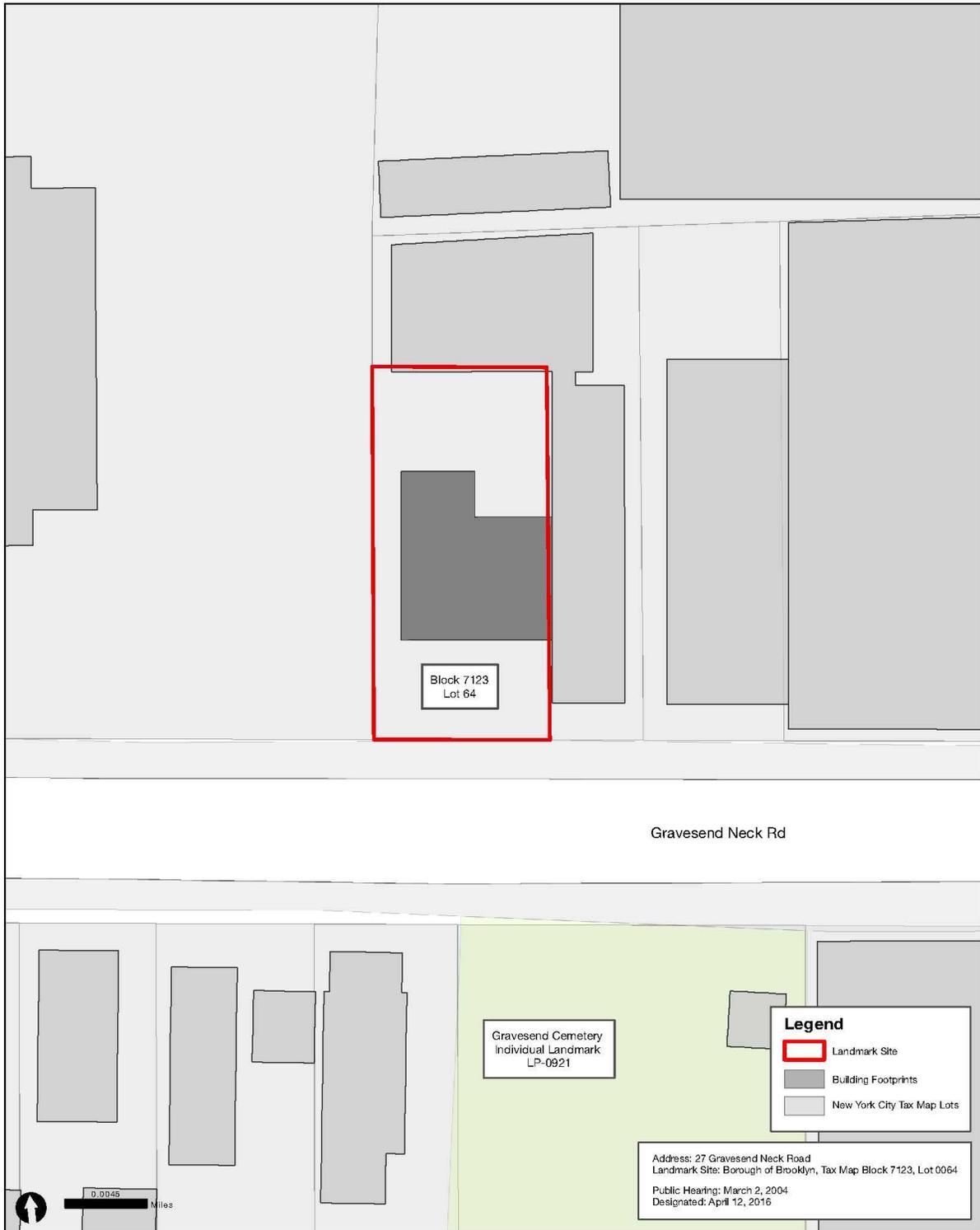


William E. Platt, Photograph of the Van Sicklen House

*Photo Source: "An Old Colonial Homestead Born Again," Country Life in America, June 1909*



Eugene L Armbruster, Rear of the Van Sicklen House, 1922  
*Photo Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections*



Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 15v1, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, DHW, Date: 4.12.2016