

REVEREND ISAAC COLEMAN and REBECCA GRAY COLEMAN HOUSE, 1482 Woodrow Road, Staten Island; Built before 1859: Architect: Not determined

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7020, Lot 123

On August 10, 2010, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were 6 speakers in favor of designation including Yvonne Taylor representing the family of Rebecca Gray Coleman, which still owns the property. Other speakers in favor included representatives of the Society for the Architecture of the City, the Preservation League of Staten Island, the Historic Districts Council, the Sandy Ground Historical Society, and the Butler Manor Civic Association. There were also letters in favor of designation from Yvette Taylor Jordon, the great granddaughter of Rebecca Gray Coleman, and from the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America. There were no speakers in opposition.

### Summary

The Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman house is a vernacular frame structure that can be documented to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest section is probably older than that and is possibly the earliest extant building surviving from the period when Sandy Ground was a prosperous African-American community on Staten Island.<sup>1</sup> The area's first African-American residents purchased property in 1828. Their numbers were bolstered in the 1840s and 50s by the arrival from Snow Hill, Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay, of numerous families



who were involved in the oyster trade and came to New York to escape harsh laws passed in this slave state prior to the Civil War. Sandy Ground is located in the southern part of Staten Island, not far from the shipping port of Rossville on the Arthur Kill to the north and the prime oyster grounds of Prince's Bay on the south, and most of its residents were employed in the oyster trade or in farming. Beginning in the 1840s through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this area, called Woodrow, Little Africa, or (more commonly) Sandy Ground, was home to a group of free African Americans who resided here in more than 50 houses. The Sandy Ground community thrived for many years, creating institutions such as the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church and a local school.

It is unclear when the Coleman-Gray House was originally constructed, although it is identified on one of the earliest surviving maps of the area, from 1859. It was occupied at that time by Ephraim Bishop, who arrived from Maryland in 1851. The house was purchased by Isaac Coleman and his wife Rebecca Gray Coleman when he came to Sandy Ground to serve as pastor of the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church in 1864. Although Isaac Coleman probably lived in the house only one year, the building has been in the possession of descendants of Rebecca Gray Coleman since that time. The house was likely built as a 1 ½ story structure, with a single room

on each story. The shed roof addition to the east, probably used as a kitchen, was added at some point early in its existence and the two-story, two-bay addition was made on the western side, possibly sometime around the Coleman's purchase. It is likely that the most recent section of the house, the two-story section on the western side, was added during the late 1880s to accommodate a growing extended family. Throughout this time, the basic form of the house has remained, although these later additions have enlarged the space. More recently, the house has been sided with contemporary materials and the window sash replaced. Its massing, fenestration pattern and siting on a large lot helps it stand out in this recently-developed part of Staten Island and its survival is a remarkable and rare reminder of this very early African-American community.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Development of the Community of Sandy Ground<sup>2</sup>

The Sandy Ground community was founded on a section of high ground near the center of the southern part of Staten Island, halfway between the well-known oyster beds of Prince's Bay on the south and the port of Rossville on the Arthur Kill to the north. This area has been known by various names through the years, such as Woodrow, Harrisville or Little Africa, and its center was at the confluence of what is now Woodrow and Bloomingdale Roads. Since this area is located inland, rather than along the shore, and was still wooded in the mid 1800s, it was not seen as desirable and therefore was not expensive. The name Sandy Ground first appears on records dating to 1779 and refers to the sandy soil of the area, particularly good for growing certain crops such as strawberries and asparagus.<sup>3</sup>

Staten Island was inhabited for thousands of years by Native Americans.<sup>4</sup> Archaeologist Alanson B. Skinner reported finding evidence of a Woodland Period (2700BP-AD 1500) Native American village at the center of what would become Sandy Ground. While most Native Americans left the island by 1700, a few remained and their descendents could be found on Staten Island as late as the early 1900s. At Sandy Ground, several black families claimed Native American descent and Skinner observed that the Native American tradition of grinding corn with wooden mortars and pestles continued at Sandy Ground into the 1890s.

During the colonial period, Staten Island was largely settled by Dutch and Huguenot families with a scattering of English and other Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Many settlers brought white indentured servants or black slaves to the island, with slaves making up between 10 to 23 percent of the population. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Staten Island's African-American population continued to grow. Some of these people were previously slaves of local residents, while other free blacks chose to settle on Staten Island because land was available and inexpensive.<sup>6</sup> Land ownership records show African-American residents purchased land in Sandy Ground before 1830. John Jackson bought 2 ½ acres of land in 1828 while he and Thomas Jackson (relationship unknown) purchased eight acres in 1835. Apparently John Jackson operated the ferry *Lewis Columbia* between Rossville and Manhattan, the only direct method of access at this time.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1840s and 50s, these first settlers were joined by several other African American families who came from an area of Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay called Snow Hill.

Although Maryland was still a slave state in these years before the Civil War, it also had a large number of free blacks, many of whom were involved in the oyster trade.<sup>8</sup> Their existence proved to be a bad example for those still living in slavery and during the 1830s, the state passed a series of restrictive laws to control and limit the activities of free black people. These new laws forbade free blacks to captain their own oyster boats or to own guns (which limited their ability to procure food for their families). In response, several African-American families involved in the oyster trade moved to Staten Island. The waters off Staten Island were also well known for the fine and numerous oysters they produced and the oyster industry was an important source of jobs for many people on Staten Island throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the oyster beds off Staten Island started to become depleted, a constant stream of maritime traffic developed between these two areas, allowing familiarity and an easy movement of people as well as products. Family names of some of these African Americans who came to Sandy Ground from Maryland at this time included Bishop, Henman, Landin, Purnell, Robbins and Stevens, while others, including the Harris and Henry families, came from elsewhere in New York and New Jersey.<sup>9</sup>

The area attracted more and more free residents of color and established its own distinct community in this period before the Civil War, creating at Sandy Ground a very early neighborhood within (what is now) New York City where free African Americans owned their own property.<sup>10</sup> Even before the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827, there had been free blacks in the city, and they tended to live together in small enclaves in different parts of each county, but it is not clear whether these people owned their own homes. It was generally difficult for newly freed people to earn enough money to purchase land, or to find individuals willing to sell it to them if they could afford it. Only two other communities of land-holding African Americans have been documented in New York at this time. The first was probably Seneca Village, begun around 1825 when John Whitehead sold off small parcels of his land near what later became Central Park, between 79<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> Streets, and Sixth and Seventh Avenues.<sup>11</sup> By 1855, the census listed 264 people at this location, consisting mostly of blacks but also including some whites (mostly Irish and German immigrants), and at least three churches, a school and a cemetery. Against the wishes of the residents the village was destroyed as part of the construction of Central Park by the end of the decade. Another settlement of free blacks began in the 1830s, but was firmly established in 1838 when James Weeks purchased property from the Lefferts family estate in what was (then) the outskirts of Brooklyn, now Bedford-Stuyvesant. More than 100 people lived in this stable African-American community throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Sandy Ground was the third New York community where African Americans were able to own property and start their own institutions, such as churches and schools. By 1850, several residents of Sandy Ground met to found the AME Zion Church, an activity which indicates a thriving and stable community. At a meeting in December, 1850 (which was later recorded at the local Register's office<sup>13</sup>) trustees were elected for the church. On December 11, 1852 this group purchased land on Crabtree Avenue for a church and a "plain wooden structure" was erected there by 1854. The building could accommodate 150 persons, and a cemetery was established on land to its west (the Rossville AME Zion Church Cemetery, a designated New York City Landmark). Other institutions, such as the local school, run by African-American teacher Esther Purnell, accommodated the children of both black and white residents. Local businesses also began, to supply what the community needed, such as the Bogardus general store and the blacksmith shop of William Bishop (begun 1888).

There have often been rumors that Sandy Ground was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad. This was a logical conclusion, since people from here traveled regularly between New York and southern slave states. Additionally, AME churches were often known for their willingness to help escaping slaves. However, since there are so few remaining structures from the original Sandy Ground community, and no written records documenting any occurrence have surfaced, this cannot be conclusively proven.

### Oysters and Oystering<sup>14</sup>

Oysters have been an important source of food and commerce in New York since before the white explorers arrived. The Lenapes were harvesting and eating oysters when Hudson arrived (shown by the huge piles of oyster shells or middens they left)<sup>15</sup> and the mollusks helped sustain the early settlers. Oysters were already well-known in Europe, having been popular since the Roman empire. The Dutch, French and British were great lovers of oysters when they arrived in the New World and this food figured prominently in European (and hence American) cuisine of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, with recipes for oysters included in most cookbooks of that time.<sup>16</sup>

Oysters grow best in “warm, brackish water in intertidal and sub-tidal areas along shorelines.”<sup>17</sup> Oysters are quite adaptable and can survive cold winters by hibernating and can also live in water up to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. They are found all along the Atlantic coast, although they grow faster and bigger in warmer water.

In Europe the traditional method of gathering oysters was to wade into the water at low tide with rakes, picking them up by hand. The Lenape showed the settlers how to row out into deeper water and use long-handled rakes with two sets of teeth, called tongs, to grab the oysters and fill their boats. This faster and more efficient gathering process was important since New Yorkers would eat as many oysters as were available. They were popular with all classes of people and large numbers of oysters were served at fancy banquets as well as in the poorest slums of the cities. New York’s first oyster cellar opened in a basement of a building on Broad Street in 1763.<sup>18</sup>

Since oysters lay their eggs in spring, oyster harvesting was initially restricted to the fall or winter months, or months with the letter “R” in them. A law to this effect, implemented by the colonial government by 1715, was an early attempt at conservation.<sup>19</sup> New Yorkers, however, were not content to restrict their oyster consumption and before long, they learned to pickle oysters to make them available throughout the year. In 1807, under pressure from local businessmen, New York stopped limiting the gathering of oysters to the colder months and in 1819, in order to be able to eat oysters any time and place, the first oyster cannery opened. The advent of steamships and then the opening of the Erie Canal allowed access to more markets, with purveyors demanding more and more oysters. In response, fishermen harvested more and more of the animals.

The oyster beds around New York had begun to show signs of depletion as early as the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, both from overfishing and from pollution. New York City’s trash and waste were washed into nearby rivers and streams, befouling waterways, groundwater, wells and beaches. By around 1750, malaria from mosquitoes and cholera from tainted water had become commonplace. Since oysters feed on the organic matter in the water in which they live, they and other creatures that depended on this habitat began to suffer. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the progress of industrialization, local rivers and bays were also used for dumping industrial waste, a situation that worsened the condition of local oysters.

The system of “planting” young oysters had been practiced in several parts of the world for many years. It had become common in Europe which had already experienced a drop in production of their oyster beds. Even though fishermen did not understand much about oyster reproduction, they had known for some time that oysters could be grown more successfully in habitat that was different from where they were spawned. There were still plenty of oysters to be gathered in the Chesapeake Bay off Maryland and Virginia, and New York fishermen realized that tiny oysters from these areas could be brought to the barren beds off Staten Island and Long Island that were known for their excellent oyster-growing conditions. Oysters that began life in the warmer waters of the Bay seemed to mature at a faster rate and once fishermen provided appropriate material for the oysters to attach themselves, they would reach an acceptable size for harvesting in one year.

Such tiny oysters were first brought for planting from the Chesapeake Bay in 1820. A schooner with a captain and four-man crew could travel from Prince’s Bay in Staten Island to the lower Chesapeake, load 2,500 to 3,500 bushels of seed oysters onto their boat and return in less than six days. Upon his return to Staten Island the captain would hire an additional 12 men to shovel the seed oysters overboard onto a specified area that was leased from the state for this purpose. Staten Island oystermen soon developed special wooden trays or “flats” for the oysters to adhere to while other locals developed the skill of making the wood splint baskets that became the standard unit of measure for the oyster trade. In this way, the oyster trade employed many people and by the 1830s was the most important economic activity on Staten Island.<sup>20</sup>

### Sandy Ground Oystermen

While some African-American residents farmed their own land and others traveled to Manhattan to work for whites, many in Sandy Ground earned their living from the oyster industry. Working on board oyster boats and collecting and transporting oysters provided an unusually fruitful method of making a living for blacks in these early days. Even before the end of slavery, it was not unusual for African Americans (both slaves and free) to work aboard ocean-going ships, where there seemed to be harmony with white seamen who apparently were willing to work with multiracial shipmates.<sup>21</sup> Since oystering did not become a major commercial industry with an established hierarchy until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans were able to become involved and gain a place in this developing field.<sup>22</sup> It required very little capital investment, yet returned a decent living, allowing the free blacks in the Chesapeake Bay area, as well as those on Staten Island, to create comfortable lives for themselves. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the oyster industry was such an important part of the economy of Staten Island that some of those who pursued it became wealthy, while others were able to support their families in a comfortable manner for many years. Work was available at many levels of the operation: on the boats, planting the seed oysters, collecting them, opening and packing them for shipping as well as selling them. Several residents of Sandy Ground were able to purchase their own boats for dredging oysters, while others worked aboard the boats of others. This activity, as well as oyster shucking and processing employed many Sandy Grounders for a long time. The 1880s and 90s were the “Golden Age” of Sandy Ground’s African American community and the area had as many as 50 homes.

Indications of severe pollution in the waters off Staten Island began in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The oyster beds were officially closed in 1916, after several outbreaks of typhoid due to eating polluted oysters. The community of Sandy Ground, so dependent on this industry, gradually declined. Some residents were able to find work in local factories or

commuted to Manhattan or New Jersey for jobs. Others relied on small farms to feed their families and supply markets in Manhattan. Eventually however, this stable community of free and prosperous African American families declined. Severe fires in 1930 and in 1963 destroyed many houses and much property, although a recognizable community continues to exist in Sandy Ground today. It consists of descendants of people who have lived in the area for more than 100 years.

### History of the Coleman-Gray House

This house, although modified through the years, is one of the earliest structures from the original Sandy Ground community that is still extant, and may well be the oldest. It probably appears on the earliest known 18<sup>th</sup> century maps of the area (such as that compiled from the Taylor & Skinner Map of 1781 and the Hessian Map of 1777), as well as on the 1853 map compiled by James Butler,<sup>23</sup> along with a number of other houses near what is now the intersection of Woodrow and Bloomingdale Roads. Since none of the buildings are identified, it is impossible to be certain, however.

The house is first positively identified on the 1859 map of H.F. Walling as the home of Ephraim Bishop, an oysterman, and his wife Ann. Bishop was an African-American oysterman who had moved to Staten Island in 1851 from Maryland.<sup>24</sup> It is unclear when the house was constructed or when it was purchased by Bishop. Ephraim Bishop died by 1862 and his wife then attained full ownership of the property.<sup>25</sup> She sold it in 1864 to Isaac Coleman who had come to Sandy Ground to serve as the sixth pastor of the AME Zion Church. Little is known about his background, but Isaac Coleman had been a pastor in western Pennsylvania since at least 1848.<sup>26</sup> At some point shortly before he moved to Sandy Ground, he married Rebecca Gray, a widow (originally from North Carolina) who was living in the 1850s and early 1860s in New York City with her children.<sup>27</sup> Isaac and Rebecca moved to Sandy Ground in 1864 and in 1865 he was transferred to Williamsburgh, Brooklyn. By 1870, Isaac Coleman had died and Rebecca Coleman was living in Manhattan with her son Stephen Gray, a waiter, his wife Martha and their four children. In 1871, Stephen Gray and his family moved to Sandy Ground with his mother, Rebecca Coleman. The house has remained under the ownership of descendants of Rebecca Gray to this day.

In 1881, Stephen and Martha's daughter Rebecca Gray (1863-1955) married Robert H. Landin (1854-1934), another oysterman who had come to Sandy Ground from Talbot County, Maryland.<sup>28</sup> Rebecca and Robert Landin continued to live in the house and had five children of their own.<sup>29</sup> Rebecca Coleman was still living in the house according to the 1880 census records, but died sometime thereafter. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the house was occupied by Robert and Rebecca Landin, their children, and Rebecca's father, Stephen Gray (until he died in 1906, a widower). By 1910, the next generation had moved in: the Landin's oldest daughter Arlene (or Alina) and her husband Abram Decker. They had children of their own, so that in 1910, the house was occupied by 12 people, including members of three nuclear families and one boarder. There were 10 people living in the house in 1920, but by 1930 there were only six people there.<sup>30</sup> In recent years the house has been rented as a two-family home and is no longer occupied by members of Rebecca Gray's family.

### Architecture of the Coleman-Gray House<sup>31</sup>

The earliest part of this house appears to be the 3-bay, 1½ story section with a shallow pitched roof near the eastern end of the building. The fact that the walls of the second story rise

somewhat above the ground story appears to express the external form of H-bent construction seen on 18<sup>th</sup> century, wooden, Dutch-American farmhouses in Brooklyn and elsewhere. This type of framing, in which heavy timbers extend beyond the first story, part-way into the second story to allow for a shallow second-story living space has been documented on these early buildings that relate to Dutch architecture, but have developed into a uniquely American version.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, these Dutch-American farmhouses were often built with a one-room plan in which an interior staircase against the wall led to a small upper room. Both of these elements exist in this house. In the western bay at the front of this section is the door, probably the original main entrance to the house. At the rear of this part of the house is the only section of rubble stone foundation that is visible on the exterior. Also in the rear and extending from this section is a double-door storm hatch, another common element on these early Dutch-American farmhouses.

To the east of this 1½-story section is a one-story, shed-roof extension that probably was originally built for a kitchen. Old photos show a brick chimney extending from the wall between these two sections, indicating the presence of a fireplace there.<sup>33</sup> This type of addition was the most common early extension of these houses. It has not been possible to determine when this room was added.

To the west of this earliest section is a two-story, flat-roofed portion. It is likely that this part was added after 1870 when Stephen Gray and his family moved there, since they had five children and would have needed more space.

The western-most part of the house is the most recent section. It was added by Rebecca and Robert Landin during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when they needed more living space.<sup>34</sup> The Landins were married in 1881 and raised many children in the house.<sup>35</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Rebecca Landin's father and brother also lived in the house, and by 1910, the Landin's oldest daughter Alina and her husband Abram Decker were also in residence there. In 1910 there were 12 people residing in the house.

This part of the house displays characteristics of a very late vernacular Greek Revival style, seen in its clean lines and simple massing. Although the Greek Revival style was used primarily in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, its use extended much later in rural areas such as Sandy Ground. It was adapted in a highly simplified manner for vernacular buildings such as this house, and was more often represented by its classical leanings such as its regularly-spaced bays, side-gable roof with returns (no longer extant but seen on early photographs) and symmetrical chimneys.

### Description

Wood-framed house; clapboard-siding; rubble stone foundation; composed of series of sections arranged horizontally, that reflect the various additions over time; house set parallel to, but back from Woodrow Road.

Sections from east to west: 1-story shed roof section; a 1½-story, 3-bay section with a shallow, side-gable, pitched roof and door in western bay; a 2-story, 2-bay section with a flat roof; a 2-story, 3-bay section with a side gable roof and a brick chimney on the eastern end and door in eastern bay.

Extant original material: at rear of earliest portion of building, small section of rubble stone foundation and basement storm cellar hatch with two metal doors; brick chimney on eastern side of westernmost section of house; original fenestration pattern.

*Alterations:* Single-story, shed-roof addition on the rear; entire house faced with vinyl siding; all windows replaced with one-over-one sash (original windows replaced by 1980; windows on westernmost section had 2/2 wood sash, all others had multi-light, double-hung wood sash); windows on oldest and most recent sections originally had wooden shutters; roof covered with asphalt shingles; original foundation mostly covered by concrete; original brick chimneys removed from east side of original 1 ½ story section, and from west side of westernmost section; front porch rebuilt on concrete pad and expanded to front both doors (originally only over westernmost doorway); doors replaced (originally wood-paneled).

*Site:* Large lot with some mature trees and bushes; paved areas behind house; driveway on eastern side of lot, non-historic wooden storage building behind house on the western side of the lot.

Site is within the National Register Sandy Ground Archaeological District, designated to recognize the Free Black community founded in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century; designation included archaeological resources as they could illuminate the evolution of the community.

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#### *NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> The Sandy Ground Historic Archaeological District is listed in the National Register of Historic Places to recognize the free black community founded in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The listing included archaeological resources as they could illuminate the evolution of the community. In addition, the area has documented Native American sites and the potential to contain significant archaeological resources related to Sandy Ground and to Native American occupation. Sandy Ground Historic Archaeological District (AO85-01-2258-DO3) National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form for the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service prepared by the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation and Historic Preservation on August 1, 1982. The Native American sites are listed with New York State Museum, Site Number NYS 7272, described as “traces of occupation” and Site Number NYS 8497 described as a “village.”

<sup>2</sup> This section on the early development of Sandy Ground is based on Lois A.H. Mosley, Barnett Shepherd, et. al., *Sandy Ground Memories* (Staten Island: Staten Island Historical Society, 2003); Joseph Mitchell, “Mr. Hunter’s Grave,” *The New Yorker* (Sept, 22, 1956); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery Designation Report* (LP-1399) (New York: City of New York, 1985), prepared by Shirley Zavin;

William Askins, *The Sandy Ground Survey Project: Archaeological and Historical Research in Support of a National Register Nomination* (New York: City College, City University of New York, 1980); William Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology of Class and Ethnicity in a Nineteenth Century Community on Staten Island* (New York: PhD Dissertation, Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1988); Minna C. Wilkins, "Sandy Ground: A Tiny Racial Island," *Staten Island Historian* 6 (Jan.-Mar. 1943) 1-3, 7 (Oct.-Dec. 1943), 25-26, 31-32; *Holden's Staten Island: The History of Richmond County*, edited and compiled by Richard Dickenson (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> *Holden's Staten Island*, 481.

<sup>4</sup> This information on Native Americans on Staten Island is based on Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 143; *Indian Notes and Monographs* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1919), 317; Alanson Skinner, "The Lenapé Indians of Staten Island" in *The Indians of Greater New York and the Lower Hudson*, edited by Clark Wissler (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1909), 37.

<sup>5</sup> On the European settlement of Staten Island and early slaveholding see Phillip Papas, *That Ever Loyal Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 9, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Many came because they felt they were being pushed out of other low-priced homes by the large numbers of poor German and Irish immigrants who flooded into New York at this time.

<sup>7</sup> *Holden's Staten Island*, 482.

<sup>8</sup> According to Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 3, there were about 150,000 free blacks in Maryland by 1860.

<sup>9</sup> National Register nomination, sec 8.

<sup>10</sup> The earliest example of landholding among African Americans in New York was probably in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch West India Company gave farms north of the city to some of their "half-freed" slaves. "Gideon and the Great Dock," <http://maap.columbia.edu/place/8.html>, accessed 12/8, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The first purchase of land happened between 1825 and 1827 by Diana and Elizabeth Harding. Information about Seneca Village comes from Ray Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and Its People, A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 66-73.

<sup>12</sup> Today there is only a small physical remnant of this community, the four houses known as the Hunterfly Road Houses (a designated New York City Landmark).

<sup>13</sup> Richmond County Register, Liber 25, page 513.

<sup>14</sup> The information on the oyster trade comes primarily from Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006) as well as numerous newspaper clippings in the LPC research files.

<sup>15</sup> Several hundred shell piles or middens have been identified in the New York City area. Kurlansky, 14.

<sup>16</sup> In spite of the similarities, European oysters are from a different genetic family (*Ostrea edulis*) from those grown off the coast of the United States, which are known as *Ostreidae*. European oysters look different, reproduce differently and have fewer offspring. Kurlansky, 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> Kurlansky, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Kurlansky, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Kurlansky, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Kurlansky, 118-124.

<sup>21</sup> According to Jeffrey W. Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), xvi and 6. Bolster reports that by 1803 black men (mostly freemen) formed approximately 18% of seamen's jobs in America.

<sup>22</sup> University of South Carolina, "The Conference on Historic Site Archaeology Papers, 1972," V7 (Institute of Architecture and Anthropology, Columbus, SC 1974), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Available at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>24</sup> The 1855 census notes that Ephraim Bishop arrived in Staten Island in 1851, although his wife Ann M. Bishop attended the founding meeting of the A.M.E. Zion Church, in December, 1850.

<sup>25</sup> Richmond County Register, Liber 58, page 73.

<sup>26</sup> Since it is the custom of the AME Church to change ministers each year, he had probably lived in many places.

<sup>27</sup> She appears in New York directories in the 1850s and early 1860s as a widow and a washer woman (colored), living on Laurens Street, in a black enclave in what is now Greenwich Village.

<sup>28</sup> It is not known whether this Robert Landin was related to another Landin family already in Sandy Ground. According to his daughter, Robert Landin was also ordained as a minister.

<sup>29</sup> According to Charles W. Leng & William T. Davis, *Staten Island & Its People, A History 1609-1929*, Vol. I (NY: Lewis Hist. Publ. Co., 1930), 478, Robert H. Landin also served as head of the Sunday school of the Rossville AME Zion Church.

<sup>30</sup> This history has been reconstructed on the basis of census records from numerous years.

<sup>31</sup> The observations here are based on the forms that are currently visible in the house. There have been many alterations to the house over the years and without further investigation of the framing and earliest materials that are not currently visible, the dates and timeline presented here cannot be confirmed.

<sup>32</sup> David Steven Cohen, *The Dutch-American Farm* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 33-64.

<sup>33</sup> The fireplace and chimney were removed at an unknown date.

<sup>34</sup> This information was supplied by Rebecca Landin's granddaughter, Yvonne Taylor.

<sup>35</sup> According to Rebecca Landin's granddaughter, Yvonne Taylor, the Landins had twelve children, six of whom died early.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House is one of the oldest surviving farmhouses in one of New York's earliest African-American communities, Sandy Ground; that the rural community of Sandy Ground, located in southern Staten Island, was started before 1840 by free African Americans, many of whom came from Maryland and were employed in the oyster industry; that activities related to oysters provided Staten Island's largest sources of employment during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; that several families came from Maryland to join other free blacks already in residence here to found a community that continued to survive through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; that Sandy Ground thrived as long as the oyster industry thrived on Staten Island, allowing many members of this community to flourish economically; that the community continued even when the oyster beds off Staten Island were closed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to pollution; that the Coleman-Gray House was purchased by Isaac Coleman and his wife Rebecca Gray Coleman in 1864 when he was appointed to be the sixth pastor of the Rossville AME Zion Church; that Isaac Coleman lived in the house for only one year before his next assignment, but that the house has continued to be owned and occupied by descendants of Rebecca Gray Coleman since that time; that while documentation has not been found, physical evidence suggests that the house probably was constructed early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a one-room and loft frame farmhouse in a style that relates to early Dutch residents of Staten Island; that various additions occurred through the years as the family grew and needed more space; that this is supported by the existence of a rubble stone foundation and angled storm hatch in the rear, the massing of the various sections and the original fenestration pattern; that despite additions and changes through the years, this house is a rare survivor of an important early African-American community that thrived in Sandy Ground on Staten Island.

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 Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House, 1483 Woodrow Road, Staten Island, and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7020, Lot 123, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair  
Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair  
Frederick Bland, Michael Devonshire,  
Joan Gerner, Michael Goldblum,  
Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan,  
Roberta Washington, Commissioners



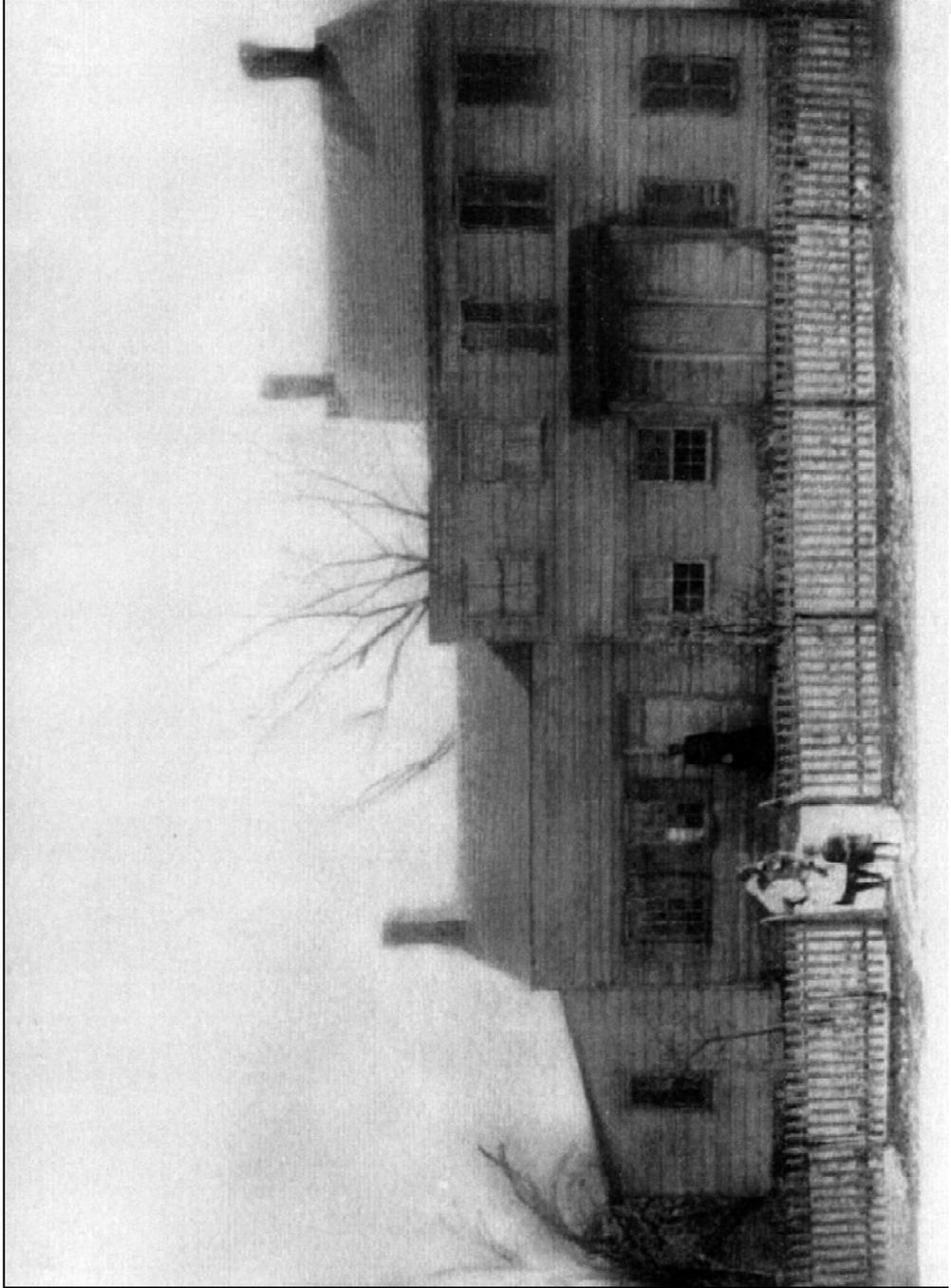
Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
1482 Woodrow Road, Staten Island  
Tax Map Block 7020, Lot 123  
*Photo: Marianne Percival, 2010*



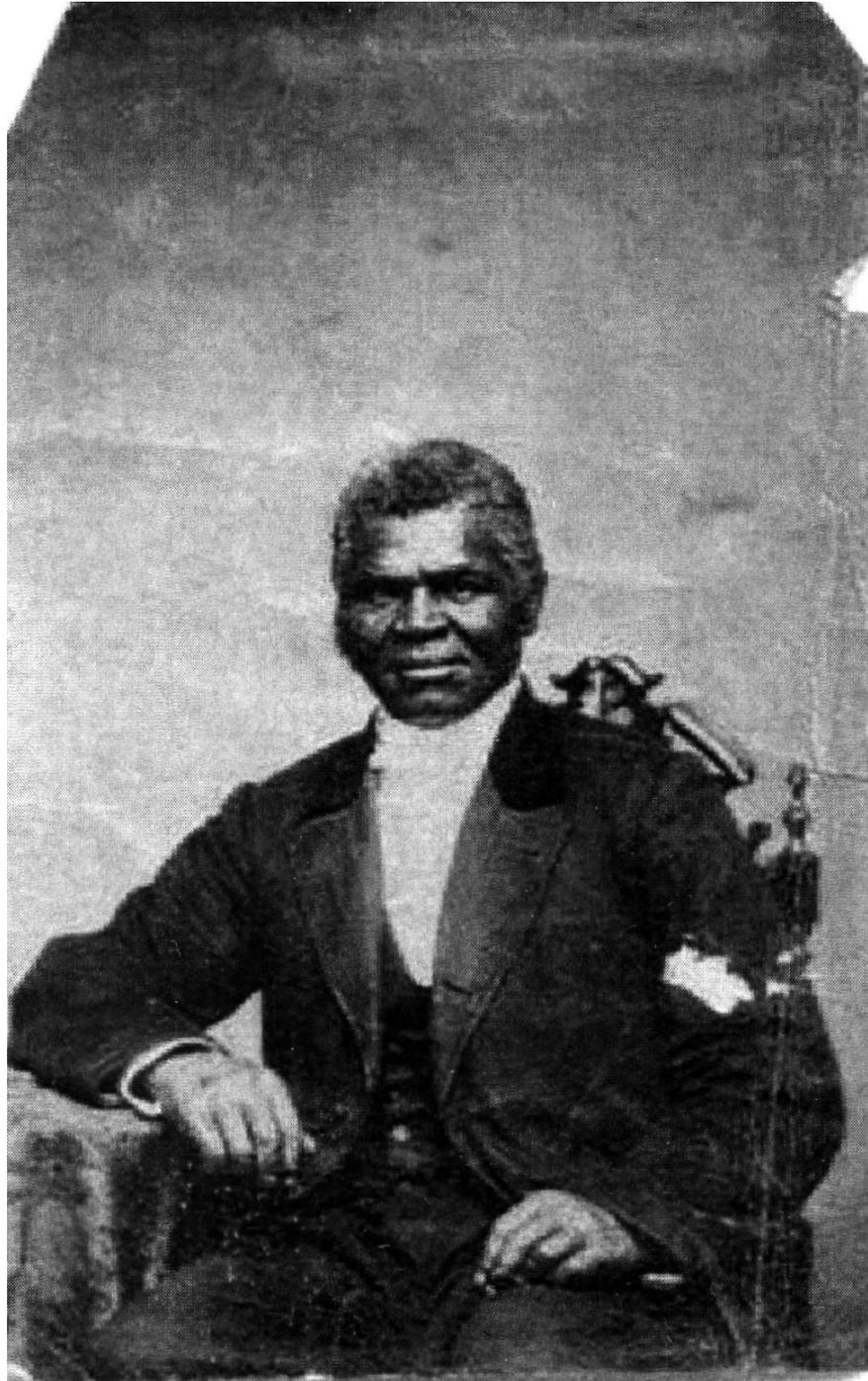
Reverend Isaac Coleman and Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
*New York City Tax Photo, c. 1980*



Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
*New York City Tax Photo, c. 1939*



Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
*Family photo, c. 1900*



Reverend Isaac Coleman  
*Family photograph*



Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
Details of front facade, Woodrow Road  
*Photos: Virginia Kurshan, 2010*





Reverend Isaac Coleman and Rebecca Gray Coleman House  
Photo: Cindy Danza, 2007



REV. ISAAC COLEMAN AND REBECCA GRAY COLEMAN HOUSE (LP-2414), 1482 Woodrow Road  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island, Tax Map Block 7020, Lot 123

Designated: February 1, 2011