

CHRISTOPHER HOUSE, 819 Willowbrook Road, Staten Island. Built about 1756.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 795, Lot 1.

On September 13, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Christopher House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 35). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner of the property has indicated to the Commission that he is in favor of the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Simple in appearance and built in the vernacular of the time, this one and one-half story stone farmhouse with a low cellar and gable roof has the scale and rugged character of a prairie homestead. Laid up in random fieldstone, the superior masonry construction of its rough walls is one of the reasons why the dwelling has withstood the ravages of over two hundred years and maintains its picturesqueness as a pre-Revolutionary War farmhouse of quality and distinction.

The original portion, consisting of one large room and attic, was built in 1756, and a section twice that size was believed to have been added about 1764. A low porch, with its back wall whitewashed, rises one step above the ground and extends the length of the House. Above it may be seen two dormers in the steeply pitched roof which were added at a later date. Six simple square columns support the porch roof. In the shingle covered gable above the stone wall at one end of the house, two double hung sash type windows open into the attic story. The lintels over the doors are simple unadorned smooth faced stone.

The Christopher House is one of the numerous buildings which were erected on the property of the Manor of Cassiltowne, an area owned by Governor Dongan which once consisted of fifty-one hundred acres. It is believed that Col. Thomas Dongan a grand-nephew of Governor Dongan, built this farmhouse in 1756. Four years later he sold the building and 175 acres to the widow Nelly Hagewout and her two sons. Her will, drawn in 1761, gave one-fourth part of her share to each of her four daughters. About this time, Joseph Christopher, who married Charity Hagewout, acquired the small farmhouse. In 1764 he mortgaged the property, and it is assumed that the money he obtained was used to enlarge the House to its present size.

It has been documented that Joseph Christopher, the owner of the House during the Revolutionary War, was a member of the Committee of Safety and a descendant of Hans Christofel who had a land grant in 1685. Tradition connects this farmhouse with patriotic Staten Islanders during the war. The proximity of the homestead and property to the Great Swamp of those days offered opportunities for escape, in case of surprise, for those who attended the clandestine meetings held in this House.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Christopher 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 Christopher House is an outstanding example of a provincial pre-Revolutionary War vernacular farmhouse, that it has excellent stone masonry construction in its walls, that it is associated with two of the oldest Staten Island families and that its use as a meeting place for the Committee of Safety on the Island gives it considerable historic importance.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Christopher House, 819 Willowbrook Road, Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 795, Lot 1, Borough of Richmond, as its Landmark Site.