

ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE, 2 Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island. Begun about 1700, remodelling and addition 1846.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 2830, Lot 49, excluding that portion of the lot lying behind a straight line parallel to the rear lot line and located forty feet behind the Alice Austen House.

On June 23, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Alice Austen House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 49). Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission has received numerous communications from people interested in the designation of this House, and it is evident that there is strong support in the community for its preservation. On September 13, 1966 and November 10, 1966 the Landmarks Commission had held earlier public hearings on this proposed designation. Eight witnesses spoke in favor of designation during these earlier hearings. The three hearings held by the Commission had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The Commission has been informed by the New York City Transportation Administration that the proposed Landmark is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, Vol. 35 No. 170, as of Tuesday, September 1, 1970. Listing as a Historic Place requires the State to consider Austen House at the same level of importance as a City Landmark. Therefore, they have no objection to Landmark Designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Austen House began as a one room frame dwelling, built between 1691 and 1710. Through many years of gradual additions and alterations the original structure expanded into the charming cottage we know today. When John Austen purchased the property in 1844, the Dutch type farmhouse consisted of an L-shaped structure. The earlier frame section parallels the Narrows and the pre-Revolutionary masonry wing extends to the rear or the West. Austen added a room to the North end of the frame wing two years later, making the house T-shaped in plan. The transformation to the Gothic Revival style took place during this alteration, with the insertion of the dormers in the graceful sweep of the Dutch Style roof. Some of the decorative ornament remains on the gables of the dormers, but the handsome roof cresting that once decorated the ridge is gone, as are the scalloped shingles that added a rhythmic pattern to the roof. The pre-Revolutionary kitchen in the rear, built of plastered stone, contains a large fireplace with its original bake oven. As was sometimes the custom in these early houses, this kitchen, now joined to the house by a connecting room, was believed to have been originally erected free of the main house.

"Clear Comfort", was the name given to this picturesque cottage that stands on waterfront property overlooking The Narrows, on a site of unparalleled scenic beauty within the City of New York. James Renwick, architect and friend of the Austen family, is credited with the Gothic Revival character of the long low wing facing The Narrows. Situated in beautifully landscaped grounds, this charming house with its excellent proportions, fine details and porch posts mantled in vines, was a showplace on Staten Island in the second half of the nineteenth century. From Alice Austen's artistic photographic record made during the 1880s and 1890s, we can see the undeniable beauty of the house in its setting, which leaves the viewer with a deep impression of architectural romanticism, beguiling enchantment and a nostalgia for this Victorian world.

E. Alice Austen (1866-1952) pioneer woman photographer, founder of the Staten Island Historical Society, the Antiquarian Society and the Garden Club, lived in the Austen Cottage for over seventy-five years. From her two uncles and her grandfather, from whom she inherited the house, she learned to operate early wooden cameras and to develop plates. By the time she was eighteen, she was a skillful photographer in all branches of this new art. From the 1880s to the 1930s, working with bulky equipment, Miss Austen recorded the panorama of the American scene with accurate precision, human warmth and historical significance. During those fifty years she produced over seven thousand negatives, and this remarkable collection is now the property of the Staten Island Historical Society.

During the depression Miss Austen experienced financial reverses. Later, she lost her home and her personal belongings, suffered adversity and crippling illness and eventually became an inmate of the City Farm Colony. Through the efforts of friends and admirers, she was rescued from destitution and oblivion. Ultimately part of her work was sold and reproduced in the Daily News, Life Magazine, Holiday and American Heritage. Miss Austen lived long enough to be recognized as one of America's foremost women photographers and to be feted by the Historical Society and her fellow Islanders. It is the hope of a committee known as "The Friends of the Alice Austen House" that her family home will be saved, as part of the esplanade project, and be restored and be used as a photographic museum exhibiting her work.

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 Alice Austen 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 Alice Austen House is a picturesque and charming example of the Gothic Revival style of architecture and is a building of great distinction, that it contains pre-Revolutionary construction and is of historical interest, and that for over seventy-five years it was the home and workshop of one of America's pioneer women photographers.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 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 Alice Austen House, 2 Hylan Boulevard, Borough of Richmond and designates as its Landmark Site, Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 2830, Lot 49, excluding that portion of the lot lying behind a straight line parallel to the rear lot line and located forty feet behind the Alice Austen House.