

VAN CORTLANDT MANSION, Basement Interior consisting of the Kitchen; First Floor Interior consisting of the Front and Back Halls, East Parlor, West Parlor, and Dining Room; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Hallway, the Washington Bedroom, and the Munro Bedroom; and the Stairway from the First Floor up to the Third Floor, Broadway and West 242nd Street, Van Cortlandt Park, Borough of the Bronx.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 5000, Lot 150 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On May 27, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Van Cortlandt Mansion, Basement Interior consisting of the Kitchen; First Floor Interior consisting of the Front and Back Halls, East Parlor, West Parlor, and Dining Room; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Hallway, the Washington Bedroom, and the Munro Bedroom; and the Stairway from the First Floor up to the Third Floor, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York which administers the Mansion has given its approval of the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Van Cortlandt mansion, designated a New York City Landmark in 1966, is one of the finest Georgian Country seats remaining in New York. Built in 1748-49 by Frederick Van Cortlandt, it remained in the Van Cortlandt family until 1889 when it was sold to the City and temporarily used as a police barracks. The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York has maintained the house as a museum since 1897. Unlike other Georgian houses in the City whose interiors were updated in the 19th century, the Van Cortlandt Mansion retains most of its handsome original interior architectural features.

The land on which the Mansion stands has important historical associations, not only with the Van Cortlandt family, but also with some of the most important figures in colonial New York. Its first European-born owner was Adriaen van der Donck (1620-c.1655). Born in Leyden, Holland, he was appointed schout, or sheriff, of the Van Rensselaer patroonship in 1641. After the death of his patron Kiliaen van Rensselaer, he moved to New Amsterdam where he became a persistent critic of Governor Willem Kieft's Indian policies. A diplomatic blunder on Kieft's part in dealing with the Indians had led to a series of massacres between the Dutch and the Indians. Van der Donck, an advocate of detente, negotiated an important peace treaty with the Indians in 1645, and was rewarded by being allowed to set up a patroonship of his own in Westchester. It was called "Colen Donk," but was more commonly known as "de Jonkheers landt," hence the name Yonkers today. It extended as far south as Spuyten Duyvil, and it included all the land presently in Van Cortlandt Park. The remains of a Dutch house, believed to be the van der Donck farmhouse, were found in 1910.

After Kieft's departure in 1647, van der Donck continued to be critical of the way New Netherlands was administered. In 1649 he was made a member of the Board of Nine Men, and in this capacity he wrote the Remonstrance of New Netherlands, setting forth the people's grievances against Governor Stuyvesant. The next year he sailed to Holland to present it to the States-General, and while there he obtained a law degree at the University of Leyden. Thus, upon his return to America in 1653 he became the first attorney in New Netherlands. At this time he was already involved in writing his famous Description of New Netherlands, and so the directors of the West Indies Company in Amsterdam wrote to Stuyvesant ordering him to make the Company's records available to van der Donck, but Stuyvesant refused. Van der Donck died shortly before the publication of his book in 1655.

After his death, his widow married Hugh O'Neal of Maryland, and when the English took over in 1664 they confirmed his ownership of the land. Between 1672 and 1693 Fredericks Philipse (1626-1702), then the richest man in New York, acquired all of O'Neal's property, and this, along with adjoining Indian lands, were consolidated by a royal patent in 1693 to form Philipsburg Manor.

Philipse was a shipping merchant, dealing with the Netherlands, the East and West Indies, and Madagascar; he also manufactured wampum. He held many offices under both the Dutch and the English administrations. At the time of Leisler's Rebellion in 1689-91, he was co-administrator of the City, but yielding to public pressure he stepped aside. Later he voted for Leisler's execution. In 1693 he built a bridge at Spuyten Duyvil, the first to link Manhattan with the mainland. He continued to serve on the Council until 1698, when he resigned after being accused of dealing with pirates.

In 1692, Philipse's adopted daughter Eva, married Jacobus Van Cortlandt, and the next year Philipse married Van Cortlandt's sister Catherine. They were children of Oloff Stevensen Van Cortlandt (1600-1684), a brewer and the fourth richest man in New York. Like Philipse, Oloff Van Cortlandt held public office under the Dutch administration. He was orphan-master, "administrator of the monies," and a member of the Board of Burgomasters. In that capacity he presided over the court for a three month period in 1656. Later that year he and several other brewers were charged by the tax collector with refusing to have his cellar inspected for evidence of smuggling. Since Van Cortlandt was a member of the court, it was some time before the case was settled, but eventually he was convicted and fined. Thereafter, his position in New Amsterdam was ambiguous. On the one hand, he was denounced from the pulpit by Everadus Bogardus, the minister, but on the other hand he continued to hold high office in the colony, including treasurer. He negotiated with the Indians at Esopus, and with the British at Hartford in 1663 over the boundary with Connecticut; he also helped to draw up the articles of surrender by the Dutch to the British in 1664 and later served under the British as a member of the Council and as Deputy Mayor. Oloff's eldest son, Stephenus, became the first Lord of the Manor of Cortlandt in 1697, and built his manor house at Croton-on-Hudson.

When Jacobus Van Cortlandt married Eva Philipse, her father transferred to them a sizeable parcel of land, the "lower Yonkers" plantation. Here he built a farmhouse on the banks of Tippet's Brook. He dammed up the brook, creating the mile-long Van Cortlandt Lake, and set up a grist and sawmill, the first industry in the area. He continued, however, to maintain a house in New York, where he was active in civic affairs. He built a new wharf along Dock (now Pearl) Street, served on various commissions and on the Council, and was twice Mayor of the City of New York, in 1710 and again in 1719.

It was his son, Frederick, who built the Van Cortlandt Mansion in 1748-49. He died in 1749, leaving three sons, the most notable of whom was Augustus Van Cortlandt, who was Clerk during the Revolution, and a Tory sympathizer. Augustus inherited the mansion. In order to secure the safety of the City records, he had them moved to the family vault underneath Vault Hill, north of the house. At the war's end he turned them over to the new Clerk and, aside from being relieved of his position, no other action was taken against him.

During the Revolution, the house was on "neutral ground," although various skirmishes were fought in the area. Lord Howe, the British commander in New York, used it as his headquarters at one point. General Washington dined there in 1776 on his way to the Battle of White Plains. In 1781 he returned, along with Rochambeau, the French commander, to plan an attack on New York. Bad weather foiled them, however, and they decided to engage the British at Yorkville in Virginia instead, the battle that climaxed the war. False signal fires were kept burning at Vault Hill to make the British think that the Continental army was still there. In 1783--the war over--Washington again stopped at Van Cortlandt Mansion while waiting for the British to evacuate New York.

In the 19th century, the house was occupied continuously by the Van Cortlandt family. Because of a lack of male heirs, several men married to Van Cortlandt women changed their names to Van Cortlandt when their fathers-in-law died, to keep the family name alive.

The City acquired the park land from the family in 1889. For a few years, a herd of bison was maintained in the park, but they found the marshy soil unhealthy. In order to guard them, the New York State Police were quartered in the house, which they used as a barracks until 1896, when it was leased to the Colonial Dames for restoration and operation as a house museum.

The Van Cortlandt Mansion, is reputedly modeled after the Philipse Manor House in Yonkers, though on a smaller scale. Unlike the more typical Georgian design, with two rooms on either side of a central hall, the plan of the Van Cortlandt House, like the Philipse Manor, is L-shaped, which may reflect the influence of Dutch Colonial houses. The main entrance on the south opens onto a central hall and stairway with a parlor on either side. The wing or "ell" extends to the rear on the eastern portion of the house and contains a back parlor, or dining room, and secondary stair hall. The second floor corresponds to that of the first floor, with central hall, secondary hall, and chambers over the parlors. The kitchen, as was customary, is in the basement of the rear wing.

The interior combines the formal elegance and symmetry of the Georgian style with practical features incorporated to best withstand the climate. Each room has a fireplace on the north wall and windows on the south, west, or east walls to take advantage of prevailing breezes. The twelve-over-twelve sash windows, three or four in each room, are uniform throughout the house and provide ample light and ventilation. All the rooms have gracious proportions and the parlor floor ceilings are a generous 10' 6" high. The basement provided a cool space to store food and supplies near the kitchen.

Much of the original architectural detail has fortunately been preserved and, where necessary, restored. A major restoration was undertaken in 1913 under the direction of the distinguished architectural historian and restoration architect, Norman Isham, and more recently in 1960. This latest restoration has uncovered the original floor boards and restored walls to what is believed to be their original colors. The house is furnished with beautiful examples of 18th century English and American furniture, some of which belonged to the Van Cortlandts.

The entrance leads directly into the Front Hall. Its most prominent feature is the U-shaped staircase, which begins its rise against the west wall where it is gently curved outward toward the base. A conservative feature of the staircase is the closed string of the treads more typical of an earlier period. The handrailing is of curly maple with handsome turned balusters, a round newel post at the base, and square newel posts with applied spindles at the landings. A window is set into a niche at the first landing. A paneled wainscot runs around the hall and up the west wall of the staircase, following the incline of the stairs. The doorways leading from the stairhall into both parlors are enframed with "eared" moldings.

The West Parlor, the less formal of the two parlors, was the room used by George Washington as his headquarters in 1783. The north wall is completely paneled and contains the fireplace and flanking cupboards, an arrangement common in houses of this period. Blue and white tiles depicting Biblical scenes surround the fireplace opening, adding a rather Dutch quality to the room. Between the fireplace and each cupboard is a slender fluted pilaster. The round-arched cupboards have paneled double doors. They open to reveal a curved shell motif set into the arch above the shelves, now used to display porcelain. The paneled wall is painted Prussian blue, a popular color in pre-Revolutionary New York houses, and the cupboard interior red. In contrast, the other three walls are white plaster, and decorated only with blue baseboard, chair rail, and ceiling molding. The three windows, which retain the original twelve-over-twelve sash, are set above low paneled window seats and are protected by interior double folding shutters.

The East Parlor, the most formal room in the house, is of exceptionally fine Georgian design. All four walls are completely paneled and are crowned by an ornamental cornice at the ceiling. The magnificent fireplace with richly carved mantel and overmantle, thought to have been added sometime after the house was built, enhances the formal elegance of the room. The fireplace opening is framed with a facing of white marble and outlined with a carved "eared" molding. The marble hearth which extends into the room is edged by a wood molding. Below the shelf of the mantelpiece is a carved frieze having as its central feature a bird perched among foliate branches. The overmantle, the only one in the house, has an "eared" molding and carved foliate frieze, echoing the forms of the mantelpiece. It is surmounted by a "broken" Georgian style pediment with

central flower-filled urn. The paneling in the room was restored in 1913, following faint outlines which remained on the walls. In 1960 the original light straw color was discovered under six layers of paint and restored. This parlor was probably originally used for serving tea and playing cards, popular diversions of the leisure class in the mid-18th century America.

The Back Hall, entered both from the Main Hall and the exterior, provides access to the Dining Room and a servants' entrance to both the Kitchen and the East Parlor. The staircase in the Back Hall reflects the simplicity of Dutch Colonial antecedents.

The Dining Room, in the "ell" at the rear of the house, has a later 18th century character, both in its architectural detail and in its function. Although dining rooms were known before the Revolution in this country, they were not common. The differentiation of rooms according to function emerged only slowly; in the earlier period people ate in any room. Washington, however, is reported to have dined in this room with Rochambeau, commander of the French army in America during the Revolution. The chimney breast projects from the center of the north wall. The fireplace mantelpiece is an exquisite example of Adamesque design, with oval sunburst, quarter fans, and slender fluted pilasters. The walls have a paneled wainscot painted dark buff, with lighter plain plaster walls above. The prominent ceiling molding appears to be a 19th century addition.

In contrast to the elegance and sophistication of the parlors, the basement Kitchen has a more primitive quality. The room, although quite large, is rather cell-like; the ceiling is relatively low with exposed beams, the plaster-on-stone walls are thick, and the two windows are small and high. A great fireplace with wide, low-arched opening and hearth dominates the Kitchen. Built into the wall alongside the fireplace is a brick oven for baking bread.

On the second floor, the Hallway has wainscot and ceiling molding. A window with twelve-over-twelve sash, interior shutters, and window seat, is on the south wall. In 18th century Georgian mansions, halls were not merely for circulation, but often were comfortable, well-ventilated family areas, as this hall undoubtedly was. The staircase railing makes a gentle curve at hallway level and continues up to the third floor.

The architectural features of both bedrooms are similar. The walls are white and decorated only with Prussian blue baseboard, window cornices, and doorway moldings. The fireplaces have paneling above them, but do not have mantel shelves. White tiles surround the fireplace opening. As in the rest of the house, the windows have twelve-over-twelve sash and interior shutters.

The west chamber is known as the Washington Bedroom. Its north wall is completely paneled, with closets flanking the fireplace, similar to the one in the west parlor beneath it. Unlike the cupboards there, however, these closets are probably a later addition. Built-in-closets would be a most unusual feature of an 18th century chamber.

In sum, the interior of the Van Cortlandt Mansion reflects the high standard of taste, comfort and convenience enjoyed by wealthy families in the mid-18th century.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Van Cortlandt Mansion, Basement Interior consisting of the Kitchen; First Floor Interior consisting of the Front and Back Halls, East Parlor, West Parlor, and Dining Room; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Hallway, the Washington Bedroom, and the Munro Bedroom; and the Stairway from the First Floor up to the Third Floor, 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 Van Cortlandt Mansion, a New York City Landmark, is one of the few remaining pre-Revolutionary country seats in the City, that the Interiors combine the formal elegance of the Georgian style, best seen in the East Parlor, with features

associated with the older, more conservative, Dutch Colonial tradition, that the L-shaped plan of the house is an equally interesting illustration of this amalgam, that the architectural detail is notable, that the house has historical significance as the residence of the Van Cortlandts, a family prominent in the history of the City since the 17th century, that it reflects their high standards of taste, that the mansion has significance for the role it played during the American Revolution, that it served as Washington's temporary headquarters in 1783, and that the restoration and maintenance of the mansion by the Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York is an early instance of effective preservation in the City.

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 an Interior Landmark the Van Cortlandt Mansion, Basement Interior consisting of the Kitchen; First Floor Interior consisting of the Front and Back Halls, East Parlor, West Parlor, and Dining Room; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Hallway, the Washington Bedroom, and the Munro Bedroom; and the Stairway from the First Floor up to the Third Floor, Broadway and West 242nd Street, Van Cortlandt Park, Borough of the Bronx and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 5900, Lot 150 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.