

CALEB T. WARD MANSION, 141 Nixon Avenue, Borough of Staten Island.  
Built about 1835 by George B. Davis.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 571, Lot 242.

On July 11, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Caleb T. Ward Mansion, 141 Nixon Avenue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). 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.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Caleb Tompkins Ward Mansion is an imposing Greek Revival structure built about 1835 on the crest of Ward's Hill commanding a magnificent view of the New York Harbor and the metropolitan area. Originally surrounded by an estate of 250 acres, the Ward Mansion is one of the last great houses remaining from a period of the city's history when the north shore of Staten Island was a fashionable resort for wealthy New Yorkers.

Development of the area began shortly after the close of the War of 1812, influenced by Daniel D. Tompkins (1774-1825), Governor of the State of New York from 1807 to 1816, and Vice President of the United States under James Monroe from 1817 to 1825. Tompkins purchased large tracts of land on the island, amounting to about 700 acres and started the village of Tompkinsville. Further changes began to take place after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 which caused a period of rapid economic growth in New York. This economic growth coincided with the spread of the Greek Revival style and some of the finest examples of it were built on Staten Island. Sailors' Snug Harbor was begun in 1831, the Seamen's Fund and Retreat in 1832, and Thomas E. Davis formed the New Brighton Association in 1834 which began to erect Greek Revival residences along Richmond Terrace. The Caleb T. Ward Mansion is one of the great houses built during this era.

Caleb Tompkins Ward (1789-1850) was descended from the prominent Ward family of Eastchester and may have been a nephew of Daniel D. Tompkins<sup>1</sup>. Ward began to acquire his estate in October of 1826 when he purchased a large parcel of land from Thomas Hulme<sup>2</sup>. In February 1829, he had his land surveyed and in January of 1833, he filed the land map with the county government<sup>3</sup>. It is likely that the house was built within a few years of the filing date. After Caleb's death in 1850, the land passed to his son, Albert, a prominent jurist on the island who had served as the first judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Richmond County from 1844 to 1846<sup>4</sup>.

Albert Ward is responsible for building St. Paul's Memorial Church (1866-70) on St. Paul's Avenue in memory of his sister, Mary Mann Ward. The Church and Rectory were designated New York City Landmarks in July, 1975. Albert Ward died in 1878 and is buried in the family plot at St. Paul's Church, Mt. Vernon, N.Y.

In December 1904, Sally Lewis Wood Nixon acquired the house from the trustees of the Ward estate<sup>5</sup>. Mrs. Nixon, a descendant of General Andrew Lewis, a Revolutionary patriot, was originally from Washington<sup>6</sup>. In 1891, she married Lewis Nixon, a prominent naval architect and pioneer in the use of steel construction for shipbuilding. Lewis Nixon (1861-1940) was born in Leesburg, Virginia, where he received his early education. In 1878, he was appointed to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis from which he graduated first in his class in 1882. He was then sent to the Royal Naval College in England where he continued his studies in naval architecture, marine engineering and gunnery. While in Europe, he studied at the great ship, gun and armor works of England and France.

After his return to this country, he was assigned to the John Roach Shipyard at Chester, Pennsylvania. He also served under the Chief Constructor at Washington and at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Nixon, to a great degree, is connected with the design and construction of the entire U.S. Navy Fleet at the end of the 19th century. In 1890, he resigned from the Navy and, for the next five years, served as superintendent of construction at Cramp & Sons in Philadelphia. He purchased the Crescent Shipyards at Elizabethport, New Jersey, where, within six years, he built one hundred vessels. He organized the Standard Motor Construction Co., the Lewis Nixon Shipyards and was president of the International Smokeless Powder and Dynamite Co., the Nixon Nitration Works, the Raritan River Sand Co., vice-president of the New York Auto-truck Co., and director of the Idaho Exploration and Mining Co. Prior to World War I, he was asked to design ships for Czar Nicholas II.

Nixon was also actively involved in New York City politics, serving as head of Tammany Hall from 1901 to 1902. He was Commissioner of Public Works for Richmond County in 1914-15 and was appointed Superintendent of Public Works for New York City in 1919. Later, he was named Public Service Commissioner <sup>7</sup>.

In 1923, Sally Nixon sold the mansion to the Ward Hill Realty Corporation which converted the house from a single family residence to a multiple dwelling. In order to comply with the then existing building codes, a number of alterations were made to the exterior and interior of the building <sup>8</sup>.

The architect of the mansion is unknown although George B. Davis (1806-1869) is credited with building it. Davis, born in Somerset, Massachusetts, came to Staten Island about 1832 in connection with the construction of the Seamen's Fund and Retreat, now the United States Marine Hospital <sup>9</sup>. The first building on the grounds, now demolished, was completed on June 12, 1832 and Davis may have been the builder/architect of this building. The large Greek Revival Hospital, still standing, was begun in 1834 and designed by A. P. Maybee <sup>10</sup>.

During the early part of the 19th century in New York, the separate roles of architect and builder were not clearly defined. It was common practice for the owner of an undeveloped property to hire a builder--mason, carpenter, etc.--when he wished to erect a house and the builder would then hire a draftsman to draw up the plans for the house <sup>11</sup>. Moreover, there was the widespread use of builders' guide books by contractors of the period. These books gave practical advice on construction techniques to those in the building trade and often included plans for houses and designs for architectural detail.

Among the most influential of these books at the time the Ward mansion was built were those by Minard Lafever which are, in part, responsible for the popularization of the Greek Revival style throughout the country.

Lafever (1798-1854) was born near Morristown, New Jersey, and raised in upstate New York in the Finger Lake region. He returned to New Jersey after his first marriage in 1824 and settled in Newark. About four years later, he moved to New York City. His first guide book, The Young Builder's General Instructor was published in 1829, followed by The Modern Builder's Guide in 1833 and The Beauties of Modern Architecture in 1835. The Modern Practice of Handrail Construction was released in 1838, and finally, his last book, The Architectural Instructor was published two years after his death <sup>12</sup>. The second and third books were among the most popular and it is in these two books that one finds much of the handsome architectural detail used in the Ward Mansion.

The mansion is a monumental, three-story high brick structure stuccoed to simulate stone. It is five bays wide and four deep, the stories decrease in height as they rise.

The two-story, tetrastyle Ionic portico of the entrance stands in front of the three central bays. Pilasters flank the front end bays and the bays of the side and rear facades. The rear facade is further enhanced by a one-story covered piazza supported by six piers. Above the entablature of the second story, the attic third story is marked by simple piers on line with the pilasters. The long horizontals of the roofline are broken by a blocking course on all four sides. A large rectangular cupola crowns the building. The square-headed windows are recessed and without enframements, only the sills of the second floor windows are original.

Before the alterations in 1923, the front portico supported a pediment and, according to the elevations submitted at the time, the columns were fluted. The portico, modelled on the north porch of the Erechthion, is copied from Plates 48, 49, 50 and 58 of The Modern Builder's Guide. Plates 48 and 49 were done for Lafever by James H. Dakin and Plate 58 was designed and drawn by Lafever. The entablature shown in Plates 48 and 58 is the same as the entablature of the Ward mansion and may be seen on all four sides of the house above the second floor. There is striking similarity between the entrance to the mansion with its "eared" enframingent and central anthemion and Plates 1 and 5 in The Beauties of Modern Architecture, but it lacks the "half anthemion" acroteria and enriched bead of Plates 1 and 5. The anthemion and acroteria motif, originally repeated on the blocking courses at roof level and on the cupola, were removed during the 1923 alteration. Plate 67 of The Modern Builder's Guide, an elevation for a "first rate" parlor, is very similar to what were the parlors in the mansion before alteration. In the entrance hall, the ceiling cornice is very like the one depicted in Plate 14 of The Beauties of Modern Architecture.

Although the builder was greatly influenced by Lafever for the architectural details, he followed the traditional five bay wide configuration so common for earlier, free-standing Georgian and Federal houses. The geometric, cube-like mass of the house is in marked contrast to the innovative use of flanking wings on country houses proposed by Lafever in The Modern Builder's Guide (Frontispiece, Plates 75 and 89). The ground floor plan is basically the typical New York rowhouse design, duplicated in mirror image and placed beside each other. The mansion has a central entrance hall of imposing dimensions to either side of which were front and rear parlors separated by a columnar screen <sup>13</sup>.

However **traditional and conservative** some aspects of the design may be, there are features of the mansion that clearly show the talent of the designer. The restrained use of rich detail, the contrast between the smooth wall surfaces and the recessed windows, the balance between the verticality of the pilasters and the strong horizontality of the entablature and roof line are evidence of his architectural sophistication. The solution to a design problem on the front facade shows creativity and freedom of thought.

Originally, the columns of the entrance portico carried the full entablature and a pediment with raking cornice. Pilasters behind the end columns visually join the portico to the facade and both structurally support two of the four beams that carry the pediment out over the front porch. Yet, the central columns have no echoing pilasters to help support the beams. Instead, the designer used two pairs of console brackets, based on the design of the console brackets that carry the lintel of the doorway on the north facade of the Erechthion <sup>14</sup>, to carry the beams where they meet the facade. Had pilasters been used, the space between them would not allow for the prominent enframingent of the doorway which would then have read as a ground floor window. Rather than reduce the importance of the entrance, console brackets were substituted for pilasters.

Although the grand hotels have been destroyed, and the great estates have been subdivided, the Ward Mansion remains as an imposing example of domestic architecture from that era of stately, elegant living enjoyed by the wealthy merchants of an earlier New York. The mansion is one of the city's finest examples of Greek Revival architecture, notable for its handsome detail and rich in historical associations with prominent New York families. The current owners of the property are in the process of restoring the house.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Three different women are cited as being the mother of Caleb T. Ward, including Phoebe, sister of Daniel D. Tompkins.
2. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Block 571, Liber S, Page 16.
3. Richmond County Clerk's Office, Map No. 4, Ward, Caleb T. --Property belonging to at Tompkinsville, February 22, 1829. C.W. Bridges, C.S. Filed Jan. 12, 1833. Now missing.
4. Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, Staten Island and Its People, III (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1930), p.316.
5. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Block 571, Liber 306, Page 26.
6. "Obituary," New York Times, June 16, 1937.
7. "Obituary," New York Times, Sept. 24, 1940.  
Mitchell C. Harrison, New York State's Prominent and Progressive Men, I (New York: New York Tribune, 1900), pp. 281-2.
8. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Block 571, Liber 546, Page 542.  
New York City Department of Buildings: Staten Island, Block 571, Lot 242, Alteration Number 333-1923
9. Leng and Davis, p. 885.
10. J.F. Richmond, New York and its Institutions, 1609-1871 (New York: E.B. Treat, 1871), pp. 582-6.
11. Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), pp. 140-5.
12. Dictionary of American Biography, XI, Supplement One (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), pp. 479-81.
13. Alteration Number 333-1923.
14. Sir Banister Fletcher, A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method, 7th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 115.

#### 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 Caleb T. Ward Mansion 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 Caleb T. Ward Mansion is an imposing residence built about 1835, that it is one of the City's finest examples of Greek Revival architecture, that the architectural detail is particularly handsome and notable, that much of the detail is copied from Minard Lafever's builders' guide books, that it has been the home of prominent New York families, and that the house is one of the last great residences remaining from a period of the city's history when Staten Island was a fashionable resort providing elegant living for wealthy New Yorkers.



Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Caleb T. Ward Mansion, 141 Nixon Avenue, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 571, Lot 242, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Photo Credit: Peter Choy, Landmarks Preservation Commission

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141 Nixon Avenue  
Tompkinsville, S.I.

DATE: c. 1835