

SUNNYSLOPE, now Bright Temple A.M.E. Church, 812 Faile Street, The Bronx.
Built c.1859-1864.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2762, Lot 27.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Sunnyslope and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.8). 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. A letter has been received supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Sunnyslope, an unusually handsome Gothic Revival manor house surviving in the Hunt's Point section of the Bronx, was built in the early 1860s on a 14.6-acre estate belonging to Peter S. Hoe in what was then a rural district of Westchester County. Hoe was the younger brother of Richard M. Hoe, and a member of his brother's firm, R.M. Hoe & Company, one of the most innovative and successful manufacturers of printing equipment in the nineteenth century. Hunt's Point was then part of the town of West Farms, a quiet area of estates and manor houses.

Sunnyslope is a Gothic Revival style house designed in the mid-nineteenth century Picturesque tradition which produced many of the handsomest estates in New York City. A square, compact, high-style stone villa, it is in the manner of Calvert Vaux, the English-born associate of Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted. There is no known connection between the Hoe house and Vaux, but there is a great resemblance between Sunnyslope and several of the designs published in Vaux's Villas and Cottages.

Although Peter Hoe sold Sunnyslope in 1864, it remained a country estate for the next several decades, despite New York City's annexation in 1874 of West Farms and the rest of the West Bronx. Eventually, like most Bronx estates, the acres surrounding Sunnyslope were sold off and developed. By good fortune, the house survived the transformation of Hunt's Point into a built-up city neighborhood and today it is an unusual survivor of the rural past of the urban South Bronx, as well as one of the finest surviving Gothic Revival houses in New York.

The Hoe family and their estates in West Farms

Peter Smith Hoe (1821-1902), for whom Sunnyslope was built, was the younger brother of Richard March Hoe (1812-1886), and the eighth child of Robert Hoe (1784-1833), founder of the firm of R. Hoe & Company. Robert Hoe, born in England, had emigrated to the United States in 1803, and

established a New York City carpentry shop under the name of Smith, Hoe & Company which made printers' equipment. During the next century the firm, renamed R. Hoe & Company, became one of the most important and innovative manufacturers of printing presses in the country. Robert Hoe introduced the cylinder press to America in the late 1820s; following his death in 1833, his eldest son Richard continued the business and revolutionized the printing industry several times with a series of inventions including the double cylinder press (1837) and the rotary press (1846).¹ Richard Hoe's obituary in the New York Times (which used his presses) explained that Hoe's rotary press

...was used in almost all newspaper offices then in existence in New-York. On this new press the form of type was secured upon the surface of a large horizontal cylinder, and printed at every revolution as many papers as the machine had impression cylinders. These cylinders were at first four in number, then six, then eight, and then ten, giving finally a maximum production of 20,000 single sheet copies an hour. Before this type revolving press was invented the machines used printed by moving the form of type back and forth, as on a plane.

The Times's writer added that

...the present perfect press was not invented until the art of stereotyping was developed. .../Hoe/ invented the press now in use, which cuts the paper after both sides are printed, folds it, and turns out the perfect newspaper. The firm, which now consists of Robert Hoe, Jr., Peter S. Hoe, Stephen S. Hoe, Stephen D. Tucker, and Theodore H. Mead, has made presses for newspapers in nearly all the large cities in America.²

As they became wealthy, both Richard Hoe and his brother Peter bought estates in West Farms, now part of the Borough of the Bronx but then one of the rural townships of southern Westchester County. Up until the time of its annexation to New York City³ the Bronx was the site of great numbers of country estates owned by affluent New Yorkers, like the Hoes, who were attracted to its scenic wooded countryside. Parts of the Bronx began to develop rapidly after 1850, but many areas, including West Farms, maintained their rural character through the end of the nineteenth century. The township of West Farms was created in 1846 out of territory formerly belonging to the township of Westchester; at that time it included Morrisania and Fordham, but Morrisania was formed into a separate township ten years later. Hunt's Point, named for Thomas Hunt, was the southeastern tip of West Farms. According to an 1886 description of West Farms, "the surface is rolling," and "within its boundaries are numerous splendid residences, some fine church edifices, and denominational institutions."⁴

Richard Hoe bought his estate, which he named Brightside, in 1858.⁵ According to a nineteenth-century historian, "Upon this property he had an elegant residence, while the farm produces some of the finest specimens of blooded cattle that can be found in the country."⁶ Brightside has often been thought to be the house at 812 Faile Street in Hunt's Point⁷, but nineteenth-century maps show it to have been located near the corner of present-day Hoe and Aldine Streets, and identify the residence at 812 Faile Street as Peter S. Hoe's estate, Sunnyslope.⁸ Brightside was a picturesque wooden villa with a mansard roof which stood at least until 1900 when the estate was broken up and sold for development.⁹

Peter Hoe bought his 14.6 acre estate, "being that piece of land lately known by the name of Cedar Mount" from Joseph Walker in 1859,¹⁰ perhaps influenced in his choice of a West Farms location by his brother. Peter Hoe bought the estate for \$20,000, and sold it in 1864 for \$55,000; the tripling in value of the estate in five years suggests that the estate house was built during those years, and the style of Sunnyslope seems to confirm a date of 1859-64.¹¹ Sunnyslope was later identified as "one of the most beautiful and substantially built mansions in The Bronx."¹²

Sunnyslope: A picturesque Gothic Revival villa in the style of Calvert Vaux

Sunnyslope is part of the mid-nineteenth century tradition of the picturesque rural villa which produced so many of the country's great estates. The tradition was initiated by Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892), one of the country's most important architects, in his Rural Residences published in a small private printing in 1837. Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) became the most influential proponent of the picturesque villa through his books on the subject, primarily The Architecture of Country Houses (1850). The villas illustrated by both Davis and Downing were characterized by rambling proportions, wooden construction, and fanciful details. Sunnyslope, however, a square, compact, high-style villa, is more in the style of Calvert Vaux, the English-born associate of Downing who published his ideas in Villas and Cottages in 1857, just two years before Peter Hoe bought his West Farms estate.

Vaux (1824-1895), who received his architectural training in London, was invited by Alexander Jackson Downing in 1850 to come to America and join his practice in Newburgh, New York. In the two years before Downing's accidental death, Vaux worked on Downing's various architectural commissions. After 1852, Vaux worked alone on villas and other commissions, publishing some in Villas and Cottages; in 1857 he moved to New York, and began his long association with Frederick Law Olmsted designing urban parks. His later work included flamboyant Victorian Gothic structures including the Jefferson Market Courthouse (1874-77) in Greenwich Village, designed in partnership with Frederick C. Withers, as well as a remodelling of the Samuel J. Tilden house (1881) at 15 Gramercy Park (now the National Arts Club), and "Olana," the Hudson River Valley villa of Frederick Church, best-known of the painters of the Hudson River School.

The buildings illustrated in Villas and Cottages are among Vaux's earliest works in the United States, and are predominantly wooden or stone country residences. Although they represent a continuation of Downing's work, they are, on the whole, more compact and in a sense more regular designs, tending to square rather than rectangular proportions.

Two of the designs in the first edition of Villas and Cottages bear a distinct resemblance to Sunnyslope: Design No.16, a "Picturesque Square House," and Design No.21, a "Simple Picturesque Country House." Sunnyslope itself can be described as a "picturesque square house." Vaux's text on Design No.16 says little about the design of the exterior, but does identify the building as a Downing & Vaux commission, built for David Moore in Newburgh. Sunnyslope and the Moore house share stone construction, a generally square shape, and picturesquely arranged large and small gables, which with dormers and chimneys make an expressive roofline. Sunnyslope does not have the overhanging eaves, the verge-board, or the brackets of the Moore house, and its details are more literally Gothic, but its general configuration is similar enough that the influence of Vaux's widely known designs, published just two years before Hoe purchased his estate, seems likely. Books like Vaux's enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth century and were widely available. Design No.21, while not as compact as Sunnyslope or as Design No.16, also suggests the same configuration and use of gables as Peter Hoe's residence.

Sunnyslope is a two-and-a-half story stone residence with light stone trim and a tiled gabled roof, above which rise two broad chimneys with pointed chimney pots. The banded colored slates arranged in broad horizontal stripes on the roof are a mark of the High Victorian Gothic style just becoming popular in New York. The roofline of the house is dominated by a large gable at the right-hand corner of both the front (Faile Street) and side (Lafayette Avenue) facades; the gable on the side facade marks a slight projection of the corner from the main wall. The side facade has a gabled dormer window terminating in a crocket, while another gabled dormer breaks the eaves line on the front facade. It is the arrangement of gables and gabled-dormers which gives the house its characteristic Picturesque look; the Gothic style is evident primarily in the treatment of windows and doors. Each gable has a pointed-arch attic window in its center, while the first and second floor windows are treated as paired or tripled lancets grouped together under a stone label lintel. The pointed arch entrance to the house, on Faile Street, is through a projecting porch, articulated by a heavy stone enframingent. To the right of the entrance, an angular three-sided bay with multiple trefoil panels is crowned with an elaborately carved crenellation. A small, one-story attached extension at the rear is not part of the original house.

Conclusion

Peter S. Hoe sold Sunnyslope in 1864, but it remained a country estate long after the annexation of West Farms to New York City. By the turn of the century, however, West Farms was becoming more and more a developed urban neighborhood. In 1912 the area was described as being "...in a transition state; for, though there are a great many apartments and flats, there are still more vacant lots. The old estates have been cut up, and very few of the elegant mansions of the middle of the last century remain to show us how the well-to-do merchants of that epoch used to live."¹³ Sunnyslope was one of the few mansions which somehow did survive. The estate lands were eventually sold off, and Sunnyslope itself was sold in 1919 to Temple Beth Elohim to serve the Jewish community of the neighborhood. Today the house is occupied and maintained by the Bright Temple A.M.E. Church, and serves as a religious center for the area of which it was once the manor house. Sunnyslope today is one of the most unusual, and one of the finest, of the small number of country estate houses surviving within the limits of New York City.

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FOOTNOTES

1. For the Hoe family and company see: Henry Lewis Bullen, "Richard March Hoe and the Evolution of Fast Printing Presses," The Inland Printer, September 1922, pp.851-854; Richard March Hoe obituary, New York Times, June 9, 1886 5:4.
2. New York Times Hoe obituary.
3. New York City was confined to the borders of Manhattan Island until 1874, when that part of today's Bronx west of the Bronx River was incorporated into the city; known as the "Annexed District," "Uptown," or "Northside," the area, formerly part of Westchester County, became part of New York County. The remainder of the Bronx was annexed in 1895. The borough of the Bronx was formed in 1898 when with the annexation of Brooklyn (Kings County), Queens (Queens County), and Staten Island (Richmond County), the City of Greater New York was created and divided into the five boroughs. The Bronx remained part of New York County until the formation of Bronx County in 1914.
4. J. Thomas Scharf, History of Westchester County, New York, including Morrisania, Kings Bridge, and West Farms, which have been annexed to New York City, (Philadelphia: L.E. Preston & Co. 1886), vol.1, p.836.
5. Bronx Liber deeds, New York Liber 72 page 548 (=Westchester Liber 342 page 433), Liber 83 page 219 (=Westchester Liber 397 page 169), Liber 84 page 234 (=Westchester Liber 403 page 268), and Liber 86 page 379 (=Westchester Liber 417 page 259).
6. Scharf, vol. 1, p.833.
7. Among these are the New York City Guide in the American Guide Series of the W.P.A., (New York: Random House, 1939), p.544, and Norval White and Elliot Willensky, AIA Guide to New York City (Revised Edition, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1978), p.320.
8. F.W. Beers, Atlas of New York and Vicinity (New York: F.W. Beers, A.D. Ellis & C.H. Soule, 1867), Plate 4: "Plans of Westchester, West Farms, Morrisania, Westchester Co.," shows "R.M. Hoe" just off the Southern Westchester Turnpike near the estates of W. Simpson, J.B. Simpson, J.B. Herrick, and W.W. Fox; well to the south is "P.S. Hoe," just southeast of which is J. Walker's "Greenbank" and the estate of P. Spofford. This location of "P.S. Hoe" matches the location of the house outlined at Faile Street and Lafayette Avenue in Perris & Browne, Insurance Maps of the City of New York (New York: 1882).

E. Robinson, Robinson's Atlas of the City of New York (New York: E. Robinson, 1885), Plate 36, specifically designates the house at Faile Street as "W.W. Gilbert 'Sunnyslope'" and shows "'Brightside' Richard M. Hoe" at the northwest corner of Hoe and Aldine. Gilbert had bought Peter S. Hoe's estate in 1867: Bronx Liber Deeds, New York Liber 110 page 6 (=Westchester Liber 531 page 108), Peter S. Hoe to Mary Emmeline Stearns; Liber 133 page 7 (=Westchester Liber 630 page 40) Mary Emmeline Stearns to Harriet S. Van Schoonhoven; Liber 135 page 128 (=Westchester 640 page 401) Harriet S. Van Schoonhoven to William W. Gilbert. The deeds describe Peter S. Hoe's estate as a large area adjacent to Hunt's Point Road.

9. A photo of Brightside can be found in Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, March 3, 1900, p.355, labeled "Old Hoe Mansion."
10. Bronx Liber Deeds, New York Liber 86 page 296 (=Westchester Liber 416 page 450).
11. Bronx Liber Deeds, Peter S. Hoe to Mary Emmeline Stearns, op. cit.
12. Randall Comfort, cited in James L. Wells, The Bronx and Its People (New York: The Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1927), vol.2, p.825.
13. Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p.380.

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 Sunnyslope, now Bright Temple A.M.E. Church has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

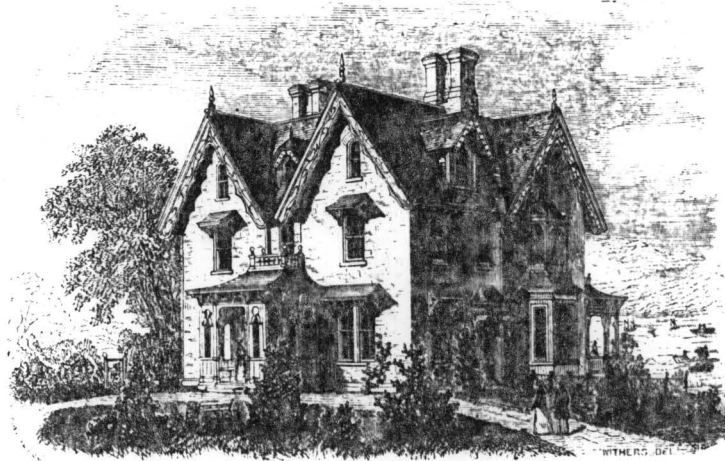
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Sunnyslope, now the Bright Temple A.M.E. Church, is one of the few surviving mid-nineteenth century country houses in New York City; that it is one of the last physical reminders of the rural past of West Farms and the Bronx; that it was designed in the manner of architect Calvert Vaux, whose widely influential Villas and Cottages had just been published; that it was built for Peter S. Hoe, partner in one of nineteenth-century America's most prominent and successful printing press manufacturing firms; and that it is one of the finest Gothic Revival houses surviving within the city limits of New York.

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 Sunnyslope, now Bright Temple A.M.E. Church, 812 Faile Street, Borough of the Bronx, and designates Tax Map Block 2762, Lot 27, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

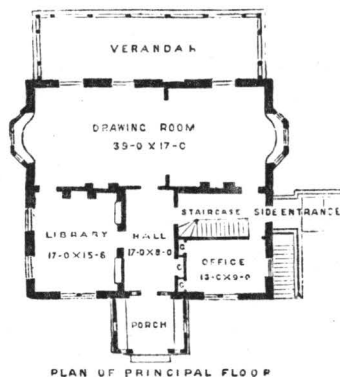
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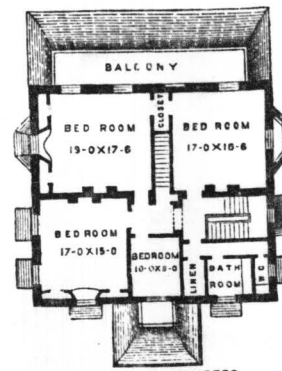
DESIGN No. 16.—(D. & V.)



PERSPECTIVE VIEW.



PLAN OF PRINCIPAL FLOOR



PLAN OF CHAMBERS

Design No.16, "Picturesque Square House,"
Calvert Vaux, Villas and Cottages
(from reprinted edition, New York: Da Capo
Press, 1968, p.212).



Sunnyslope, now Bright Temple A.M.E. Church
Hunt's Point, The Bronx

Built: 1859-64

Photo Credit: Landmarks
Preservation Commission