

710 BAY STREET HOUSE (Boardman-Mitchell House), Borough of Staten Island,  
Built 1848.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 528, Lots 12 and 50.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 710 Bay Street House (Boardman-Mitchell House) and the proposed designation of the Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses, including the owner of the house, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The well-preserved Boardman-Mitchell House at 710 Bay Street, is a relatively rare surviving example of a fine early Italianate villa, dating from the initial period of Staten Island's urban development. Built in 1848 in the Village of Edgewater, now a part of Stapleton, the house is situated atop a steep bluff bordering Bay Street with an extensive view across the Narrows to the Manhattan skyline.

Through the Boardman and Mitchell families, who owned the house for a total of 120 years, the house has important associations with Staten Island history. Dr. James R. Boardman served as Resident Physician at the nearby Seaman's Retreat Hospital from November 1836 to April 1844 and was again re-elected to the same position on May 12, 1849. Boardman was also an early investor in Staten Island real estate buying and selling various parcels of land, some of which he later turned over to his son. The second owner, Captain Elvin Eugene Mitchell, was a Sandy Hook pilot who rose to fame in 1886 when he made a dramatic rescue on Long Island Sound -- saving the lives of 176 people who were aboard a sinking Cunard liner.

#### The Development of the Area and the Construction of the House

The relatively isolated and rural character of Staten Island began to change in the early years of the 19th century with the advent of regular steamboat ferry service in 1817 between Tompkinsville (laid out by Daniel Tompkins between 1819 and 1821) and lower Manhattan. The Seaman's Retreat Hospital was established near Tompkinsville in 1831. Suburban development was beginning in New Brighton and Clifton. Increasing urbanization made new development in Edgewater both profitable and desirable.

In 1834, W.J. Staples (who gave his name to the area as Stapleton) and the heirs of Daniel D. Tompkins combined their properties, had E.W. Bridges survey the land, and then divided it into lots. In June 1835, a map of the property was filed at the County Clerk's Office as Map No. 8.<sup>1</sup> This tract ran south of the village of Edgewater along Bay Street to the Vanderbilt ferry at Clifton then westward along Grymes Road (now Broad Street) to where it met the head of the canal (now Canal Street). The western line ran southerly along what is now Tompkins Avenue to the boundary of Clifton, then eastward to meet Bay Street.

Broad Street (then Grymes Road) was Edgewater's main connection with the county seat at Richmond and, for that reason, Staples and Tompkins designated the lots along that thoroughfare for commercial development. Those lots immediately adjacent to the

commercial lots, bordering them to the south are small and narrow (fronting Tompkins Street and Brownell to Broad). Those further south on the hill (Harrison Street) are deeper and have wider fronts to the street while those lots on Bay Street are wider still since the slope extending down Harrison to Bay Street was considered more desirable for fine residences.

While Tompkins Street was eventually built up with homes for the German immigrants who worked at the nearby Bechtel brewery, Harrison Street with its larger lots was inhabited by the "gentry." The commercial area of Edgewater, then primarily a fishing port was situated around Canal and Water Streets (which today flank Tappan Road), and fishing sloops, oyster boats, and clamming scows -- with their catches -- were berthed within the canal.

In 1841, John E. and Marie A. Jennings bought four adjoining lots of the Staples-Tompkins property (Lots No. 240, 241, 242, and 243) which fronted on Bay Street and extended westward 200 feet to newly-mapped Brownell Street. Since the Jenningses' property taxes remained at the same level throughout the period of their ownership, it would appear that they did not improve the property. On June 8, 1845, the Jenningses sold "all lots and premises" to James R. and Matilde Boardman. Dr. Boardman was elected Resident Physician of the nearby Seaman's Retreat Hospital from 1836 to 1844 and again in 1849, and he also had an extensive private practice.<sup>2</sup> Staten Island tax records indicate that Dr. Boardman's house was completed in 1848. It is not known if the house was designed by an architect, but its solid construction and well-executed details exhibit fine craftsmanship. A large Italianate villa, it was designed in the preferred style for a fashionable suburban dwelling in the mid-19th century. This style was widely used in such picturesque early Staten Island suburban developments as New Brighton and Clifton, but its use here in the more urbanized setting of Edgewater gives the house special distinction and character in the community as befits the prominence of the original owner.

#### The Environment of the House

The Boardman property was on the shoulder of the hill facing Bay Street and south of it, on the hill's crest, several lots were sold to a sea captain with the surname of Jacques who built a substantial residence there in the early 1850s and moored his sloop to a private dock on his property at the foot of the slope. Entrance to both the Boardman and Jacques properties was from Brownell Street for the grade of the bluff along Bay Street was too steep to permit a driveway.<sup>3</sup> North of the Boardman property on Bay Street survive four small pitched-roof houses which were part of the village of Edgewater when it was a fishing port. When Bay Street was widened (c.1900) following the infill beyond the Staten Island Rapid Transit tracks, the county built a high retaining wall of bluestone in front of the two villas on the hill.

Around the turn of the century, Captain Jacques' daughter inherited his house and demolished it after she moved to Todt Hill. On its site she erected eight houses, four facing Bay Street (quite large for the area but only six feet apart) and four smaller houses on Brownell Street -- all of which she rented out as multiple dwellings through World War II.

#### Ownership by the Mitchell Family

Dr. Boardman died, intestate, in 1893, and the property passed to a court-appointed referee, Stephen D. Stephens. The estate was finally settled on June 14, 1894, when Dr. Boardman's widow, Matilde, was able to purchase the house at public auction for the sum of \$6,000. She immediately sold it to Captain Elvin Eugene Mitchell, a prominent Sandy Hook pilot who was something of a local hero.

Captain Elvin Eugene Mitchell was a founding member of the Sandy Hook Pilots Benevolent Association.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1856 in Millbridge, Maine -- now part of Pembroke -- the son and nephew of Maine sea captains, he was also the grandson and nephew of Sandy Hook pilots, James W. Van Pelt, Sr. and Jr. At 17 he came to Staten Island from Maine to become a pilot, and with family help, managed to get his license in 1883. That same year, on April 19, he married his cousin, Julia Marie Van Pelt, at St. Peter's Church in New Brighton. The Van Pelts are among the earliest pre-Revolutionary families on Staten Island.

On October 31, 1884, Elvina F. Mitchell was born. She was to live at 710 Bay Street until her death in 1966. One of the first "Beauty Queens," she won a New York Beauty contest in 1903 with the prize of a trip to Bermuda, on which she took her whole family. A very "modern" girl, she was one of the first proponents of tennis here, playing with the Ward girls from atop Grymes Hill. Her father turned over his house to her in 1923, whereupon she removed the shutters, sheathed the house in cedar shingles, and replaced the balustrades with boxed-in shingle guards. She also moved Dr. Boardman's horse-and-buggy barn from the northwest corner of the property on Brownell Street to a location near the house, and purchased a flivver, which she cranked up herself.<sup>5</sup>

On March 5, 1886, Julia Louise Mitchell was born. She married, on July 2, 1916, Dr. George Francis McGann of Brooklyn. A son of hers, living in California, has the earliest known photograph of the house. It shows a white clapboard building with green shutters, wide overhanging Italianate balusters on the wide flanking balconies at the first floor. The same balusters appear on short steps at the stoop and more balusters atop the entrance pavilion from a broad deep balcony on the second floor. Most interestingly, it shows a large lawn sloping down to a narrow road which skirted the shores of the Narrows. This was before the landfill was created beyond the Staten Island Rapid Transit railroad, and before large piers were built jutting out onto the Narrows.<sup>6</sup>

On March 8, 1888, a son, Elvin Alfred Mitchell, was born who died on December 10 of that year. On August 9, 1890, the fourth child was born to the Mitchells and christened William A. Like his father, he too became a Sandy Hook pilot. On October 11, 1916, William A. Mitchell married a Manhattan girl, Elizabeth Wilkes, the younger sister of Elvina's best friend, at St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street. The couple moved to Brooklyn to raise a family, and William A. commuted by ferry to the Sandy Hook Pilots Office at St. George. He retired as a Sandy Hook pilot in 1939.<sup>7</sup> His son, William Alexander Mitchell, who was born on November 20, 1921, has followed family tradition and is a third-generation Sandy Hook pilot.

The father, Captain Elvin Mitchell, was able to purchase No. 710 Bay Street in 1894 with the "Award Money" he received from the Cunard Lines for saving the lives of all passengers aboard the ship Oregon which sank in Long Island Sound. In the early morning hours of March 14, 1886, following the first watch in high seas, 50 miles east of Ambrose, a coal sloop rammed with great force into the Cunard liner, the S.S. Oregon, which was the line's "greyhound" of record-speed fame, capable then of 30 knots. Water swamped the engines and she listed sharply, pitching at the bow. The collier sank immediately with the loss of all on board. Nearest to the Oregon was the sloop, Phantom, belonging to Captain Elvin E. Mitchell with a Captain Parker of Clifton aboard.

Mitchell tacked the Phantom to the lee of the Oregon, then removed all 176 persons aboard the sinking ship. The women and children were placed aboard the Phantom and the men passengers and crew were towed behind in lifeboats. The Oregon sank beneath the waves at eleven o'clock. A North German Lloyd liner, which came on the scene about noon, took the Cunarders aboard and into New York harbor. Mitchell salvaged what he could; all lifeboats but one he took in tow and returned to the Cunard Line. The one

had been rowed by Captain Parker to Fire Island to report the wreck. Mitchell was presented with a gold medal by the British Government, and the Award Money from the Cunard Lines out of what they received from Lloyds of London for the insurance.<sup>8</sup>

Captain Mitchell died in 1936 at 80 years of age. His daughter Elvina died at 82 in 1966, and in 1968 the house at 710 Bay Street was purchased from her estate by Donald Glyn, who lived there for 10 years. At that time the house was a two-family dwelling, having been converted by Miss Mitchell before her death.<sup>9</sup> The present owners -- the fourth family to own the house -- bought it in 1978. They have returned it to a one-family home and are presently engaged in restoring the house, both inside and out.

### Description

As seen today, the large cubically-massed Italianate villa is covered with cedar shingles painted grey and has contrasting white trim. The wide overhanging eaves of the low hipped roof are supported by broad curvilinear brackets, a major feature of the Italianate style. A low triangular pediment intersecting the roofline shelters a pair of central arched windows which light a small third-floor room which Captain Mitchell maintained as his "lookout." Here, he kept a long telescope and a logbook in which he recorded the names of the ships which he saw passing in the Narrows. At each side of the pediment, set below the eaves, are narrow horizontal windows with three panes each, demarking the side bays of the front elevation. The central bay, which projects slightly, continues to be the dramatic focus of the facade. At the second floor, a pair of French doors open onto a low square balcony above the large enclosed entrance pavilion. This type of porch is an unusual feature for an Italianate house and is not often seen in the New York area, being more common in northern New England where severely cold winters made them desirable. The handsome entrance doors are crowned by a two-part glass demi-lune fanlight and are flanked by paired wooden Doric pilasters which support a wide entablature and a heavy cornice with evenly-spaced modillions. On either side of the porch is a tall arched window to light the entry. The second floor windows have four-over-four wooden Italianate sashes which are intended to resemble casements. They are enframed by wide wooden casings with projecting, cornice-type lintels which rest on carved brackets. The first floor windows are French doors which open onto narrow balconies with a view of Bay Street and the harbor. The sides of the house, which are visible from Bay Street, are identical in design, and each has four Italianate-enframed double-hung four-over-four windows and two windows at ground level which light the rooms in the basement. The Italianate cornice continues around the sides of the houses and across the rear roofline. The rear facade which faces Brownell Street is similar to the front except that the parlor windows provide access onto a long open veranda, one story in height, which has tall square wooden posts and railings with turned spindles as opposed to the balusters of the front. The space between the rear of the house and Brownell Street is occupied by a large yard and garden.

Today the Boardman-Mitchell House at 710 Bay Street survives as a fine early example of a fashionable Italianate villa, a suburban type here used in a more urbanized setting. Closely associated with both the earlier and later periods of development of the Edgewater community of Staten Island, it also achieves significance as the home of the prominent Boardman and Mitchell families who made important contributions to medicine and to pilot boating in New York City.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Map No. 8 on file at the County Clerk's Office, Borough of Staten Island.
2. Seaman's Fund and Retreat, Annual Report of the Physician in Chief and Auditing Committee for 1862, (New York: J.M. Davis, 1863).
3. Both the Boardman and Jacques properties are clearly shown in the Atlas of Staten Island, published in 1874 by J.B. Beers & Company of 36 Vesey Street, New York City.
4. Up until 1887, each Sandy Hook pilot owned his own sloop and went out to meet the incoming boats as they approached Ambrose Lightship, and there was, understandably, a great deal of competition. In 1887 one of the most devastating storms broke in this marine area in which 44 of the 69 sloops of the Sandy Hook fleet were lost. The survivors of this free-enterprise system got together with the remaining captains whose sloop had not gone down, and formed the Sandy Hook Pilots Benevolent Association. Pooling their resources, they sold their remaining sloops up and down the coast and purchased one large ship on which a dozen or so pilots went out each day and were dropped off on the incoming liners and freighters in rotation. This system is retained, today, and the Association maintains two ships which are berthed adjacent to the Staten Island ferry terminal at St. George in what was the former Coast Guard Headquarters. The Old Administration Building on this base was originally built 1868-71 as the Office Building of the Third District United States Lighthouse Depot, and was designated a New York City Landmark on November 25, 1980.
5. This and much other important information about the Mitchells and the house at 710 Bay Street was provided by the families of direct descendants of Captain Elvin Mitchell.
6. The date of the photo is unknown. It may date from the Boardmans' residence in the house, as a horsecar line was running along Bay Street by 1874. The tracks of the Staten Island Railroad (now the Staten Island Rapid Transit) were extended from Clifton to Tompkinsville in 1884. Part of the route was on a trestle over the water. About 1900 landfill was created under and beyond the tracks.
7. A newspaper article about the career of William A. Mitchell as a Sandy Hook pilot appeared in the Daily Mirror of February 23, 1939.
8. On the occasion of his 79th birthday on April 19, 1935, Captain Elvin Mitchell was interviewed by reporter Charles E. Beyer who published Mitchell's reminiscences of the wreck of the Oregon in his column, "Along the Waterfront" in Thursday, May 2, 1935 (the newspaper is undetermined at present).
9. The various plans and permits for the alterations made by Elvina Mitchell are on file at the Staten Island Department of Buildings.



## 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 710 Bay Street House (Boardman-Mitchell House) has a special character, special historic 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 710 Bay Street House (Boardman-Mitchell House) was built in 1848 for Dr. James R. Boardman, Resident Physician at the nearby Seaman's Retreat Hospital; that it is a relatively rare surviving example of a fine early Italianate villa dating from the initial period of Staten Island's urban development; that its solid construction and well-executed details exhibit fine craftsmanship; that among the prominent Italianate features of the house are the handsomely enframed windows with four-over-four sash, the wide overhanging eaves, and the large curvilinear brackets; that the second owner of the house, Captain Elvin Eugene Mitchell, was a well-known sea captain and a founding member of the Sandy Hook Pilots Benevolent Association; and that the house has close associations with both the earlier and later periods of development of the Edgewater community of Staten Island.

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 710 Bay Street House (Boardman-Mitchell House), Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 528, Lots 12 and 50 as its Landmark Site.

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Photo Credit:  
Carl Forster  
1982

710 BAY STREET HOUSE  
(Boardman-Mitchell House)  
Staten Island

Built: 1848



Photo Credit:  
Gordon Roberts  
1981

710 Bay Street House  
(Boardman-Mitchell House)  
Edgewater, Staten Island

Built: 1848 for  
Dr. J.R. Boardman