

MANEE-SEGUINE HOMESTEAD, 509 Seguine Avenue, Staten Island. Built late 17th Century - early 19th Century; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 6666, Lot 1.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Manee-Seguine Homestead, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A letter has been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Located on the shore of Prince's Bay near the southern tip of Staten Island, the Manee-Seguine Homestead, later known as the Homestead Hotel or Purdy's Hotel, is characteristic of the rubblestone dwellings built by Staten Island's earliest settlers. There are less than twenty houses remaining on Staten Island which were built before 1750. Of these, the Manee-Seguine Homestead is one of the few probably constructed before 1700. ¹

The Manee-Seguine Homestead occupies a portion of what was originally the long narrow 140-acre tract (roughly the area bounded by today's Lemon Creek and Wolfe's Pond and extending northward from the water to Amboy Road) which was patented to Paulus Regrinet in 1670.² In 1694 the same tract was patented to Paulus Richards, a New York City merchant and owner of considerable property on Staten Island. Like many of the early houses built on Staten Island's typical shorefront colonial patents, the Manee-Seguine Homestead is set fairly close to the water. ³ The oldest or eastern part of the structure may well be associated with the 17th-century owners of this land. It cannot be determined from surviving deeds when the 18th-century owner, Abraham Manee, a French Huguenot, acquired this property. ⁴ Since no land transactions are recorded for Paulus Richards after 1699, the Manee purchase may have occurred just after the turn of the century.

Early voyagers to the New World had noted the abundance of oysters in New York's surrounding waters, but precisely when the commercial potential of the abundant oyster beds of Prince's Bay began to be appreciated is not known. It was obviously not long overlooked. Seventeenth-century records for this area contain a 1679 reference to a lime-making kiln on nearby land owned by Christopher Billop (oyster shells provides abundant raw materials) and other 17th-century sources refer to pickled oysters sent from New York to Barbados. ⁵ Legislation regulating oyster-taking dates from the beginning of the 18th-century. In 1737 ten residents of Richmond County were authorized by the Colonial legislature to protect the island's oyster beds from "strangers" and given the power to seize those oysters which had been illegally taken. Among them was an Abraham Munnet, possibly associated with this house.

Abraham Manee -- a descendant of the early 18th-century purchaser -- died in 1780 and the house came into the possession of Henry, James and John Seguine, also of French Huguenot background, sometime before 1786.⁶ Members of the Manee family did not, however, leave the Prince's Bay area; many bought property in the immediate vicinity and were active in the oyster trade throughout the 19th century.

Henry, the principal owner of the Manee-Seguine Homestead, James and John were three of James Seguine's eleven children, part of a large family already claiming a prominent place in Staten Island's first census of 1706.⁷ During the period of Henry's occupancy of the Manee-Seguine Homestead, the natural oyster beds of Prince's Bay were depleted and the "planting" of seed oysters from other local waters begun. By 1813 the quality of Prince's Bay oysters had gained considerable renown; they are mentioned in a guide to New York published in that year. Beginning in the 1820s seed oysters were imported from Maryland and Virginia waters for planting in Prince's Bay. Continued growth and expansion of the industry in the 1830s and 1840s brought with it the free black oystermen from the Chesapeake Bay area who established the nearby community of Sandy Ground.

Born in 1801 and following in the footsteps of his father Henry, Joseph H. Seguine, the oldest son, also profited handsomely in the oyster trade. His fleet of oyster schooners was mentioned in 1848 by his nearby neighbor Frederick Law Olmsted.⁸ Joseph however, did not neglect the plowing of the land for the plowing of the deep, a failing of many Staten Islanders, according to Olmsted, who noted "...the profits of fisheries and other marine employment fostered by it, has absorbed and withdrawn from nobler occupation (i.e., farming) most of the youthful enterprises and capital of the county."⁹ Census records reveal that Joseph Seguine's farm was one of the island's largest; his barn was described in 1841 as the "largest and best in Richmond County."¹⁰

The imposing Greek Revival mansion, a designated New York City Landmark, built by Joseph Seguine in 1840 on the opposite or west side of the private road (today's Seguine Avenue) which led from the homestead to Amboy Road may have been required to serve the family's need for larger spaces than the old homestead provided, but its modernity and size also expressed the enlarged eminence and affluence of its owner. Construction of this grand replacement for the homestead also coincided with Joseph's embarkation upon new business ventures. In 1848 he established the Staten Oil and Candle Company on the portion of his lands now occupied by the former S.S. White Dental Manufacturing Company; in a small cluster of buildings near the shore more than a hundred persons were engaged in the manufacture of candles made from palm oil imported from Africa. Joseph was also the President of the Staten Island Railroad Company; today's Staten Island Rapid Transit system follows the route he proposed in 1853. Construction was delayed and did not begin until four years after Seguine's death in 1856. Although the Greek Revival mansion was Joseph Seguine's principal residence, the family's roots as embodied in the homestead house were not forgotten. It is possible that the house continued to serve some members of the family after 1840. When it was sold in 1867 by Joseph's widow Ellen and his son Henry H. Seguine, the house was still referred to by family members as the "old homestead."¹¹

In 1874 the Manee-Seguine Homestead was purchased by Stephen Purdy and late 19th-century photographs show the building with its identifying sign -- "Homestead

Hotel." It was one of several resorts established in the Prince's Bay area toward the end of the century.¹² A community of summer cottages grew up at the same time in the vicinity of the Homestead Hotel. Oystering remained a thriving business, but oyster consumption was also the goal of many a person enjoying a day's outing from the city. Carriages would meet the trains arriving at the Prince's Bay Station near Amboy Road and carry their passengers the mile or so to the hotels and inns near the shore. Thus the Manee-Seguine Homestead also evokes the almost forgotten chapter of Staten Island's history as a popular summer resort.

Polluted waters spelled the end of the Prince's Bay oyster industry during the first decade of the 20th century, but not the Homestead Hotel. Operated by Purdy's son for many years, it remained a popular local watering place. More recently, it has been returned to use as a private residence.

The Manee-Seguine Homestead occupies a slightly elevated embankment which fronts a grassy slope descending to Purdy Place. A row of handsome shade trees parallels the south or front side of the house. From its porches one looks out over the marsh grasses of the tidal wetlands to the south of Purdy Place. Beyond lie the waters of Prince's Bay, the broad sweep of its shore and -- in the far distance -- Raritan Bay and New Jersey's Atlantic Highlands. It is a setting and a view which retains its power to link the presentday viewer with those who perceived this same vista more than three-hundred years ago.

As seen from the exterior, the Manee-Seguine Homestead consists of two main sections, both of which were constructed in several stages. To the east there is the larger one-story, five-bay-wide section constructed of rubblestone. Wood shingles cover the east and north walls and smooth white stucco the south or front wall. Attached to the west end of this structure there is a smaller two-story gabled wood-frame addition; this section is four bays wide. The first story of its south facade is, like the earlier structure, covered with heavy stucco. Elsewhere wood shingles are used. The rear slopes of the roofs on both sections of the house have been extended to cover later one-story additions and provide dramatic sweeping profiles.

The main part of the one-story stone section of the house was built in two stages. The original house -- the two eastern bays of the present structure -- consisted of just one room with a cellar and an attic. Entrance was through a hatchway, still visible in the cellar, located on the east side of the building. The rear or exterior wall of the fireplace and chimney stack remain visible on this side of the house as well. The rubblestone walls of the cellar and first floor of the house are approximately two feet thick. The massive joints which support the main floor boards can be seen in the cellar. On the average they measure 10½ inches deep and 8 inches wide, and as is common with early construction, are far larger than necessary to carry their load. The seven attic rafters above this part of the house are original. Every other rafter has a collar beam making a total of four. The east end rafter is notched with a "VII" where the collar beam frames into the rafter. The massive beams and rubblestone construction, common in early Staten Island houses, indicate that this part of the house was built in the late 17th or early 18th century. The earliest possible date of construction would appear to be c. 1670, the year of Paulus Regrinet's patent.

Because grants made to Christopher Billopp in 1676 and 1687 cite one boundary of his 932-acre patent as "Regreniers Creeke" and "Regroons Creek" (today's Lemon Creek -- the west boundary of the Regrenier patent), it would appear that Paulus Regrenier did in fact occupy the lands which had been patented to him in 1670.¹³ The oldest part of the Manee-Seguine Homestead thus may well date from the 1670s.¹⁴

The extension added to the original one-room house during the early 18th century is clearly associated with the period of Manee ownership. This addition, consisting of the three westernmost bays, provided a second room and a center hall which extends the depth of the house. Conversion of a simple one-room dwelling to a house with a more spacious and elegant plan is not uncommon on Staten Island; the Alice Austen House at 2 Hylan Boulevard underwent a very similar alteration during the same period.¹⁵

Built of stuccoed rubblestone, the extension matches the original house; it is of the same height and depth and has an attic; it lacks, however, a cellar. Rafters in the attic above this section are original too. Most have collar beams and are notched with Roman numerals indicating the method of construction. Entrance was provided by a heavy panelled wood "Dutch door" topped by a narrow transom; both are now obscured by the modern aluminum frame storm door. Although not original, the facade windows are of early date; they are twelve-over-eight. Heavy panelled shutters on these windows are of similarly early date; their original wrought-iron hardware survives.

At the same time the house was enlarged, or perhaps during the mid-18th century, a large, characteristic Staten Island spring or bell-cast eave was added to the north side of the house. Long, slightly curved pieces of wood were attached to the ends of each rafter with large nails. When two small one-story rooms were subsequently added across the rear, new rear rafters were placed over the old ones thus extending the slope of the roof to cover the lean-to. Left in place were the spring eave rafters which are above the lean-to ceiling and can be seen from the attic. It is probable that a spring eave was added to the south or front face of the house as well, but there are no remains of it today.

It has been recently demonstrated that the spring eave was derived from 17th-century construction techniques used in northern France and is a feature which clearly suggests the importance of this ethnic tradition in the history of New York's earliest architecture.¹⁶ Although the construction methods adopted by the builder rather than the owner of the house were probably a greater determinant of its ethnic character, the survival of the spring eave here seems particularly appropriate in a house long-associated with French Huguenot settlers.¹⁷

Other significant features of the older stone section of the house include a very wide porch which extends the width of the south facade. It is of fairly recent date, but probably replaces an earlier porch that had fallen into disrepair. The present porch posts substitute for the much thinner supports which appear in photographs taken during the 1960s. Brick end-chimneys are a prominent roof feature. Although the interior is not subject to this designation, it may be noted that a considerable amount of early woodwork remains. Particularly striking is the panelling on the deep window reveals. The first floor ceiling

was raised above its original level, probably during the period when the house was used as a hotel. The reduced height of the attic rendered the earlier rooms at this level unusable.

The wood-frame structure at the west end of the house was added by the Seguines during the early part of the 19th century. It includes a kitchen and pantry on the ground floor; above there are several small bedrooms. The first floor facade windows in this addition are six-over-six; the heavy panelled wood shutters with wrought-iron hardware may be contemporary with the construction of this section. The main entry is located in the eastern bay of this facade. Above there are small windows containing nine lights; shutters here, however, are modern. Sometime after 1975 the open porch extending the width of the south facade was enclosed and provided with aluminum frame windows.

The lean-to extensions at the rear of this section are perhaps contemporary with those added to the stone portion of the structure. Rafters were added to the ends of the original rafters in a similar manner as in the earlier building in order to continue the rear slope of the roof over the lean-to. Roofing material is modern red asphalt, as it is over the stone section of the house. The single chimney of this addition is located toward the west end of the structure. The battered cap makes it a more prominent roof feature than the end-chimneys of the earlier building.

Although sections of the Manee-Seguine Homestead are no longer as readily visible as one might wish and it has acquired some modern accretions such as the second story shutters, storm doors and an enclosed porch, its importance to the history of Colonial and early 19th-century architecture on Staten Island has not been diminished. The long sequence of extensions and alterations within that period, as well as its juxtaposition with the Greek Revival Seguine mansion, mirrors the history of its successive generations of owners and demonstrates a parallel evolution in dwelling house style and construction.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Elsa Gilbertson , Early Houses of Staten Island: Their Architectural Style and Structural Systems , M.S. Thesis , Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, Columbia University, 1982. Table 1, pp. 6-7. Eight pre-1700 houses are listed. All are designated New York City Landmarks except the c. 1674 Lakeman House at 2286 Richmond Road. The Lakeman House has undergone extensive alterations and additions; a large portion of the exterior walls was recently faced with artificial stone.
2. Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences: Archives, Land Papers. This collection contains extensive material pertaining to early Staten Island patents.
3. The other surviving Colonial period houses sited in a similar manner are as follows: Poillon-Seguine-Britton House, Alice Austen House, Neville House and the Kruetzer-Pelton House.
4. Spellings of this name vary in early documents; the first deed lists the name as "Monee"; by the late 18th century "Manee" is the standard spelling.
5. Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences: Archive, Hugh Powell Collection, Prince's Bay and the Oyster Industry. Much of the information provided here concerning the Prince's Bay oyster industry is taken from this invaluable collection of documents, newspaper clips, public records, etc., and the summary of this material prepared by Mr. Powell. The reference to a lime-making kiln on land owned by Christopher Billopp is cited in Shirley Zavin et al, The Conference House, Staten Island, New York: Historic Structure Report, New York: The Conference House Association, 1980, p.6.
6. Richmond County, County Clerk's Office, Liber of Deeds, Book H, p.37. Although not recorded in the County Clerk's Office until June 23, 1816, the deed for the land acquired by Henry, James and John Seguine is dated June 5, 1786. The land is cited in the deed as "...the same in their actual possession." The Seguine occupancy of this land could date as early as 1780, the year of Manee's death.
7. Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis. Staten Island and Its People: A History 1690-1929. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc. 1930, Vol. III, pp.37-38. The biographical material on Joseph C. Seguine includes a general history of the family. See also: Staten Island Historical Society: Genealogy Collection.
8. Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences: Archive, Frederick Law Olmsted Collection. Olmsted describes a visit to the Seguine House and farm in a letter to his father dated March 9, 1848. Transcript by Barnett Shepherd of the original letter in the Library of Congress: Frederick Law Olmsted Papers.

9. Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences: Archive, Hugh Powell Collection, Box 7, folder 148. Olmsted's criticism is included in the 1859 Annual Report of the Richmond County Agricultural Society, a report which is prepared as Secretary of that organization. Dr. Samuel Ackerly, from whom Olmsted purchased his Staten Island farm, had earlier noted the tendency of Staten Island residents to "abandon the plow to plow in the deep." See Samuel Ackerly, "Agriculture of Richmond County," Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society for 1842. Albany, 1843, 11, p.194.
10. Ackerly, "Agriculture of Richmond County," p. 211.
11. Richmond County. Liber of Deeds, Book 70, p. 211.
12. An 1874 atlas of Staten Island identifies the Greek Revival Seguine mansion as the "Prince's Bay House" suggesting that it too had been converted to a hotel. A 1907 atlas shows a "Bayview Hotel" just north of the Seguine House; another hotel is located near the shore on the west side of Seguine Avenue.
13. Zavin, et al, The Conference House, p.18.
14. The earlier construction does not seem to be associated with the Paulus Richards patent of 1694. Richards is identified as a wealthy New York merchant; his Staten Island holdings would appear to be related to that fact. The original house could also be associated with Manee's c. 1700 purchase. However, since the construction methods employed for the stone extension seem to date from the early 18th century, a Manee addition to a house he constructed a relatively short period of time earlier seems a less likely possibility than a Manee addition to an existing structure.
15. The original dwelling, a one-room house of c. 1700-1725, was enlarged during the second quarter of the century; the additions included another room, a center hall and a "Dutch door." A portion of the original room was taken up by the center hall. See Shirley Zavin et al, The Alice Austen House: Historic Structure Report, New York: Friends of the Alice Austen House, Inc., 1979, pp.44-50.
16. Gilbertson. The Early Houses of Staten Island, pp.16-22. "Coyau" is the French term for this structural feature.
17. Ibid., pp.65-66. The spring eave construction which still survives at the Conference or Billopp House closely duplicates the techniques employed in northern France. Christopher Billopp, on the other hand, was decidedly English.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Manee-Seguine Homestead has 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 Manee-Seguine Homestead is one of the less than twenty pre-1750 structures remaining on Staten Island; that it is one of the few of these pre-1750 structures which was probably constructed in the late 17th century; that certain of its features, and particularly the spring eave, reflect the construction techniques employed by builders of French Huguenot background; that it enlarges our understanding of the role played by ethnic tradition in the development of New York City's Colonial period architecture; that the extensions and additions to the Manee-Seguine Homestead from the early 18th through the early 19th century document significant aspects of dwelling house construction during that period; that it embodies the history of its successive generations of owners whose livelihoods, like those of many early Staten Island residents, were derived both from the yields of its surrounding waters and rich farmlands; and that because of its conversion to a hotel in the latter part of the 19th century, the Manee-Seguine Homestead also evokes Staten Island's history as a summer resort.

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 Manee-Seguine Homestead, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 6666, Lot 1 as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Photo Credit: Janet Adams
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Manee-Seguine Homestead
509 Seguine Avenue

Architect: Unknown
Built: Late 17th Century -
early 19th Century