

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 21, 1989; Designation List 213
LP-1652

GUSTAVE A. MAYER HOUSE, 2475 Richmond Road, Staten Island. Built between 1855 and 1856.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 942, Lot 37

On April 19, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Gustave A. Mayer House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13), consisting of Tax Map Block 942, Lots 37 and 46. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The trustee of the property spoke but took no position at the time of the hearing; later, after indicating that he was conditionally not opposed to designation of only a portion of the proposed Landmark Site, he stated that he was opposed to any designation. The Commission has received many letters in favor of designation, including a letter from one of the house's two occupants, who are the settlers and beneficiaries of the trust, and a petition with 152 signatures.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Gustave A. Mayer House, a fine Italianate villa, was among the first rural residences in that style built on Staten Island and is a rare survivor of its type and period within the city limits. It is significant, as well, due to its virtually intact condition. In sympathy with the theories of the Picturesque espoused by Alexander Jackson Davis and his collaborator Andrew Jackson Downing, the house is placed to take best advantage of its sloping site. Occupying a crest overlooking a historically-important Staten Island crossroads, the Mayer House was originally built for David R. Ryers between 1855 and 1856 by an architect and/or builder unknown to us today. This symmetrically arranged, two-and-a-half-story frame structure is characterized by a full-width porch, consistently fine detailing, and elegant belvedere. In the 1890s confectioner and inventor Gustave Mayer made the villa both his home and place of business, there manufacturing innovative items such as fancy sugar wafers, decorative metal objects, and other products. Members of Mayer's family still occupy the house which dominates grounds that recall the original Picturesque landscaping, at one time carefully tended by Mayer himself.

Early History of the Site

The Mayer House's locality has been developed as far back as Staten Island's earliest colonization; the neighboring settlement at Nieuwe Dorp (1670s) was one of the island's first.¹ Around 1720, the property was sold to the Vanderbilt family as farmland; however, the site included the juncture of routes leading to New York, Richmond, and Philadelphia which induced the Vanderbilts to accommodate travellers. A number of inns, "The Rose and Crown" and "The Black Horse" being the most renowned, were built at this intersection.² The site's importance to Staten Island's history was ensured when Daniel D. Tompkins instituted his steamboat ferry line from the island's southern tip to New Jersey in 1817, making Richmond Road the preferred route from New York to points south.

In 1855 the Parkinson family sold the old "Rose and Crown" property (which apparently had reverted to domestic use) to David R. Ryers.³ He was descended from a Dutch family which had settled in Flatbush as early as 1671 and was prominent in the eighteenth-century history of Staten Island. One of the few surviving members of the family, Ryers (also spelled Ryerse, Ryerss) owned the inn at the Richmond County Hall during the early 1850s and commanded the Westfield contingent of the New York State Militia. In 1855 he demolished "The Rose and Crown" and by 1856 had replaced it, at a higher elevation on the site, with the large Italianate residence still standing today.

The Picturesque Movement and Technology in the United States⁴

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the work and publications of architect Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-92) and landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-52) promoted a revolution in American rural and suburban architecture. Their conception of the house in relation to the surrounding landscape--secluded in nature and designed for the enjoyment of vistas--was based on English theories of the Picturesque, a painterly approach to scenery emphasizing texture, variation, and intricacy. In his only published work, Rural Residences (1837/38), Davis offered the "first and most evocative"⁵ house pattern book for Americans interested in villa architecture, understood to be a country residence built by a person of means and taste, whose cultivated life required that the surroundings be laid out for the pleasure of its occupants. This model of rural life was furthered by the pattern books of Downing. Visiting the United States from Sweden between 1849 and 1851, Fredrika Bremer noted that "nobody, whether he be rich or poor, builds a house or lays out a garden without consulting Downing's works ..."⁶

Although public structures and the more costly and prestigious residences were often constructed in masonry, wood

was the more available, and thus more economical, building material throughout much of the United States. The revolutionary balloon-framing system, popularized in Chicago during the 1830s, replaced the traditional and slow braced-frame construction method (involving hewn joints and massive timbers) with a quickly assembled frame of nailed joints and two-inch boards of varying width. It is significant, therefore, that in Victorian Cottage Residences⁷ Downing--apparently then unaware of the new system of construction--praised the aesthetic qualities of wooden frame structures. He wrote that bracketed construction gave a home a character of lightness; this concept, along with European influences, helped to inspire the development of Picturesque frame houses in America. In short, Downing's aesthetic recommendations had a technological counterpart; both influenced the realization of Picturesque ideals throughout the country.

The Italianate Villa Style

Originating in England as part of the Picturesque movement, the Italianate villa style was conceived as a variant of the classical idiom. It was introduced to the United States during the late 1830s, and popularized by Downing's pattern books⁸ as an alternative to the Gothic and as a mode which combined patriotic classical associations with an opportunity for originality; in his Treatise on Landscape Gardening, Downing refers to it as the "Tuscan, or American" style. Soon Italianate houses were to be found throughout the country, produced by prominent architects and by builders as well. One version, often called "Italian villa," featured asymmetrical massing juxtaposed with a prominent tower; however, Italianate buildings were often symmetrically arranged cubic masses with low-pitched roofs, projecting eaves, large decorative brackets, porches, round-headed windows (often paired or trebled), hood moldings, bay windows, and roof-top belvederes--elements which could be adapted to several materials. Both Downing and his one-time associate Calvert Vaux illustrated symmetrical designs for Picturesque homes and considered them appropriate to peaceful sites with broad lawns and rounded trees.⁹

During the mid-nineteenth century, Staten Islanders of the managerial and professional classes frequently employed the Picturesque Italianate style in designs for their estate villas. Concurrently, residents of the island's villages and nascent suburbs were erecting more modest houses using the same vocabulary. The financial Panic of 1873 and the subsequent depression helped to bring about the demise of the Italianate style; therefore, in America, most Italianate survivors date from the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

Virtually intact, the Gustave Mayer House is a fine example of the symmetrical, Italianate villa style. The house's importance is magnified by the scarcity of surviving rural residences in New York City. The small number of mid-century

rural residences in the other boroughs--H.F. Spaulding House (1879) and 175 Belden Street House (c. 1880), Bronx, and 102-45 47th Avenue House (c. 1871), Queens, all designated New York City Landmarks--are two decades later in date than the Mayer House and are part of the "Picturesque cottage" tradition, rather than that of "high style" villas.¹⁰ Of the handful of villas extant on Staten Island, 710 Bay Street (Boardman-Mitchell) House (1848), Hamilton Park Cottage (1860s), and 2876 Richmond Terrace House (c. 1853)--all designated New York City Landmarks--and the W.C. Anderson House (pre-1853) are also in the Italianate style. Yet only the Mayer House is a premier example of the Italianate villa style: the combination of prominent porch, cupola, and consistent Italianate detailing gives the building its architectural distinctiveness.¹¹

Subsequent History of the Site and its Owners

Ryers sold the twenty-acre property--consisting of the house, reached by a circular lane, and a large barn with a pond at the upper end of the site--in 1867 for \$20,000 to Homer Bostwick. Two years later, Bostwick sold it to James M. Davis, a Wall Street banker and a member of a prominent Staten Island family.¹² In 1886 Davis sold much of his property in the area to William O. Ross, partner in the firm Hughes & Ross, who began to develop New Dorp as a commuter suburb due to the nearby station of the Staten Island Railroad. In October, 1888, George M. Root prepared a map for Hughes & Ross, filed the following year, which subdivided their holdings, calling the venture Crown Park. Some of the land had been purchased by the Catholic Church which established St. Stephen's Home for boys, for which the adjacent street is named. The church sold part of its property, including the villa covered by this designation, to Gustave A. Mayer in July, 1889.¹³ Although Root's survey of 1888 identifies the house and its front yard as lot 46, today the Staten Island Tax Map labels it lot 37 and calls the adjacent corner property--not part of this designation--lot 46.¹⁴

Mayer, born near Ulm, Germany in 1845, apprenticed in the confectioner's trade in his native country and in Switzerland.¹⁵ After immigrating to New York in 1864, he established his own business and found a ready market for his imaginative confections. Twelve years later he brought his bride, the former Emilie Becker, and his business to Staten Island. At his bakery in Stapleton he produced printed biscuits or wafers; many of the molds he designed and patented were adopted by the larger bakeries in the country, making Mayer a pioneer in the industry. (He was known as the originator of the "Nabisco sugar wafer.") From his small manufacturing establishment, Mayer sold his products to the most respected restaurants, groceries, and confectioneries in New York, among whom were Sherry's, Delmonico's, Park and Tilford, and Purssell's.

After purchasing Ryers' house with approximately one-half acre of land, Mayer moved his family (sometime between 1896 and 1898) and business (after 1898) there. During the first decade of the family's residence, the property was the border between suburban and rural environments: while the blocks of New Dorp were only half built up, St. Stephen's Place, an unpaved road, separated the Mayers' villa from a "thickly wooded" area.¹⁶ Mayer enlarged the basement for business purposes, and there later conducted his small manufacturing experiments, inventing such novelties as: "Sparkling Brilliant Reflectors," meant to enhance electric lighting, but primarily used as holiday decorations; nickel-plated wire candy baskets; "Concave Sign Letters" enclosed in glass; birch beer; and a patented room humidifier. These undertakings are representative of a whole field of small local industries--linoleum, fireworks, metal products, building materials, and many others--that once proliferated on Staten Island.

In addition, Mayer devoted his energy to the house's landscaping, tending pines, spruces, yuccas, ferns, and rare plants, as well as installing rock gardens.¹⁷ In the center of the front garden stood a fountain (vestiges of the basin and pedestal remain), and at one side a "viewing ball" on a pedestal attested to the owner's interest in light-reflecting metallic objects. Purchasing two adjacent lots at the corner of Union Place (now Odin Street) and St. Stephen's Place in 1903, Mayer was able to relocate the carriage house there from another part of the site by 1909.¹⁸ He died in 1918; the house is still occupied by members of his family.¹⁹

Description

The House:

Dominating the site which slopes down towards Richmond Road, the Gustave A. Mayer House is a two-and-a-half story cube capped by a square belvedere and encircled on three sides by a single-story porch.

The single-story, timber porch envelops the front of the house, extending seven bays in width and wrapping around on either side. It is composed of flattened arches separated by simple posts, which are aligned with projecting breaks in the cornice. The posts rest on brick piers; the spaces between are filled with two rows of square-paned windows. On the main (southeast) facade, a splayed staircase of eight treads with newel posts and slightly curved balustrades connects the porch with the front yard. On the southwest side several bays have been enclosed, including the southernmost bay which is almost totally glazed with panes to match those at the basement level and has a door giving access to the front porch. On the northeast side, the enclosed bays are clapboarded like the rest of the

structure and pierced by a variety of window types. Attached to this side and to the rear are one-story extensions. The southwest side has a small extension at the second level.

The main mass is articulated with decorative corner boards and a string course which separates the clapboarded lower two stories from the smooth attic story. All fenestration is wood-framed and, on the two main stories (except for windows in the additions), round-arched. On the first story, the windows are tall, four-over-four double hung sash in framed openings; facing the porch, the windows reach the floor and are fitted with three-paned, paired French doors capped with divided tympanum glazing. The rear door, with its two glazed upper panels and two solid lower panels, is capped by a peaked hood and flanked by wooden shutters which do not appear to be original. The front entrance has two four-panel doors topped by a glazed, flattened-arch transom, and surrounded by a molded surround. Of equal width and above it on the second story is a triple-arched window ensemble with deeply carved wood ornament. Its central four-over-four sash is flanked by narrower two-over-two lights. Other openings on the second story are four-over-four, double-hung sash set in rectangular frames with thin pilasters. The rectangular attic-story windows alternate with carved wooden brackets. Some of the openings in the aforementioned extensions and enclosed sections of the porch are rectangular.

The low, hipped roof is crowned at its center with a square belvedere, or cupola. A 1929 photograph shows that at one time the cupola was surmounted by an elaborate metal pinnacle.²⁰ On each of the four sides, a string course supports a series of four round-arched, four-over-four, double-hung sash windows with merging enframements. The shallow-pitched roof is supported on carved wooden brackets.

Landscape features:

The fieldstone garden wall (appearing in the 1909 survey) and decorative iron gate along Richmond Road still stand in good condition. Near the center of the garden are the remains of the fountain (the basin and pedestal much overgrown). Tall hedges now block views of the property from Odin Street and St. Stephen's Place; however, the front lawn, bordered by trees on either side, still affords uninterrupted views of Richmond Road from the front of the house.

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NOTES

1. Charles William Leng & Edward C. Delavan, Jr., A Condensed History of Staten Island (New York, 1924), 7, 21; Charles William Leng & William T. Davis, Staten Island and its People (New York, 1930), vol. 5, 15; Loring McMillan, "The Rose and Crown Tavern" (part I), Chronicles of Staten Island, I, no. 7 (198?), 61-64 and (part II), I, no. 8 (Summer, 1987), 65-69.
2. During the Revolutionary War, General William Howe established his headquarters at the Rose and Crown. It was there that on or about July 9, 1776 he received a copy of the Declaration of Independence. See Leng & Davis, vol. 5, 15; Ira K. Morris, Memorial History of Staten Island (New York, 1900), 212, 216.
3. See McMillan, 69; Richard M. Bayles, History of Richmond County, Staten Island, New York (New York, 1887), 569; Leng & Davis, vol. 2, 947; Morris, 212. Regarding the date of purchase, see James Butler, Map of Staten Island, 1853, Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, (hereafter, SIIAS) which identifies a building as "Ryer's Hotel." Captain Ryers is listed as "Commanding Sixth Co. Dist., First [Division], First Brig., First Reg., New York State Militia" (Comprising the Second Elec. District of Westfield); see Staten Islander, Sept. 11, 1847, also Sept. 15, 1852, and Feb. 19, 1853; H.F. Walling, Staten Island Map of 1859, at the SIIAS.
4. See Vincent J. Scully, Jr. The Shingle Style and the Stick Style, rev. ed. (New Haven, 1971), xxxviii-xlvi; Sarah Bradford Landau, "Richard Morris Hunt, the Continental Picturesque and the 'Stick Style'," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 42, no. 3 (Oct., 1983), 272-89; Paul E. Sprague, "Chicago Balloon Frame," The Technology of Historic American Buildings, ed. H. Ward Jandl (Washington, D.C., 1983), 35-61; Leland M. Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture (New York, 1980), 100; William Harvey Pierson, Jr., American Buildings and their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque (Garden City, N.Y., 1978), 2, 10, 296-97. The primary sources are: Alexander Jackson Davis, Rural Residences (1837/38; rpt. New York, 1980); Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (1850; rpt. New York, 1980); Downing, Victorian Cottage Residences (1842; rpt. New York, 1981).
5. Jane B. Davies, introduction to Davis, Rural Residences, [i].

6. See the introduction to Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses.
7. Downing, Victorian Cottage Residences, 124 (design VI).
8. Downing, Victorian Cottage Residences, preface by A. Placzek; Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses, vi, 257; Jane B. Davies, introduction to Davis, Rural Residences; Davies, "Blandwood and the Italian Villa Style in America," Nineteenth Century, 1, no. 3 (Sept., 1975), 11-14; Alan Gowans, Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression (New York, 1976), 316-23; Pierson, 296-97; Virginia & Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York, 1984), 212; SIIAS, Staten Island: An Architectural History (exhibition), May 13-Sept. 16, 1979 (Staten Island, 1979), 6, 10.
9. See, among others, Downing, Victorian Cottage Residences, 147 (design IX) and Calvert Vaux, Villas and Cottages (1857; rpt. New York, 1968), design 14. See also James Early, Romanticism and American Architecture (New York, 1965), 60.
10. LPC, H.F. Spaulding House (Coachman's Residence) Designation Report, Report prepared by Rachel Carley (New York, 1981); LPC, 175 Belden Street House Designation Report, Report prepared by Rachel Carley (New York, 1981). The 102-45 47th Avenue House is described as "modified Italianate" but has many "picturesque cottage" details; see LPC, 102-45 47th Avenue House Designation Report (New York, 1987).
11. LPC, 710 Bay Street House (Boardman-Mitchell House) Designation Report, Report prepared by James E. Dibble (New York, 1982); LPC, Hamilton Park Cottage Designation Report (New York, 1970); LPC, 2876 Richmond Terrace House (Stephen D. Barnes House) Designation Report (New York, 1976).
12. Leng & Davis, vol. 2, 885; Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, 79, 80, reel 60, p. 954 (Indenture, Mar. 28, 1986, between Emilie and Paula Mayer and Carl J. Sutter); McMillan, 69.
13. Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, 192, p. 237.
14. Regarding the change in lot numbers, see Elisha Robinson, Atlas of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York (New York, 1907).
15. Leng & Davis, vol. 4, 517-18; Trow's Business and Residential Directory of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York (New York, 1898), 68; Standard Directory of

Richmond Co, (1895-96), 189; McMillan, 69; Charles L. Sachs, Made on Staten Island: Agriculture, Industry, and Suburban Living in the City. [Exhibition catalogue.] (New York: Staten Island Historical Society, 1988.) Borough of Richmond, Topographical Survey (New York, Nov., 1909), sheet 55. Mayer's experiments were acknowledged in 1876 when he was awarded a medal by the American Institute of New York.

16. See Borough of Richmond, Topographical Survey (New York, Nov., 1909), sheet 55. The LPC is indebted to Hugh Powell of the SIIAS for his patient assistance with historic maps and literary sources.
17. See Leng & Davis, vol. 4, 518. This account is in part based on a conversation with Julie Wortman on September 7, 1988, in which Ms. Wortman, formerly of the Survey Department, recounted her discussion with Emilie Mayer in the Spring of 1988. See notes in the Research file. Also, the LPC is indebted to William Rigby, whose first-hand knowledge of the property assisted the writing of this report.
18. Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, 299, p. 211; Robinson (1907); Borough of Richmond, Topographical Survey (Nov., 1909); Richmond County, Office of the Register, reel 60, pp. 954-56. Although originally heard as part of the Landmark site, this property (now identified as lot 46) is not covered by the designation.
19. In 1986 Mayer's surviving daughters conveyed the property to a trust for their benefit with Dr. Carl Sutter, the trustee, as residuary beneficiary on the death of the survivor.
20. See New York Public Library, Photographic Views of New York City 1870's-1970's from the Collections of the New York Public Library (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981), microfiche no. 1242.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Gustave A. Mayer House, 2475 Richmond Road, Staten Island, 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 Mayer House was among the first rural residences in the Italianate style built on Staten Island and is a rare survivor among the city's non-urban homes; that the house is virtually intact; that it exhibits the Picturesque theories of Alexander Jackson Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing; that the architecturally distinguished and symmetrically-ordered two-and-a-half-story frame house is characterized by its full-width porch, consistently fine detailing, and square belvedere; that the house overlooks its spacious site at an historically important crossroads near New Dorp; that it was built for David R. Ryers between 1855 and 1856 by an unknown architect and/or builder; that in the 1890s the structure became the residence and place of business of Gustave Mayer, confectioner and inventor, whose sugar wafer mold designs and patents were influential in the American baking industry and whose other experiments in manufacturing were typical of late-nineteenth-century small business undertakings in Staten Island; and that members of his family still occupy the house and grounds which recall the original Picturesque landscape.

Accordingly, pursuant to Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Gustave A. Mayer House, 2475 Richmond Road, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 942, Lot 37 (and excluding Lot 46), Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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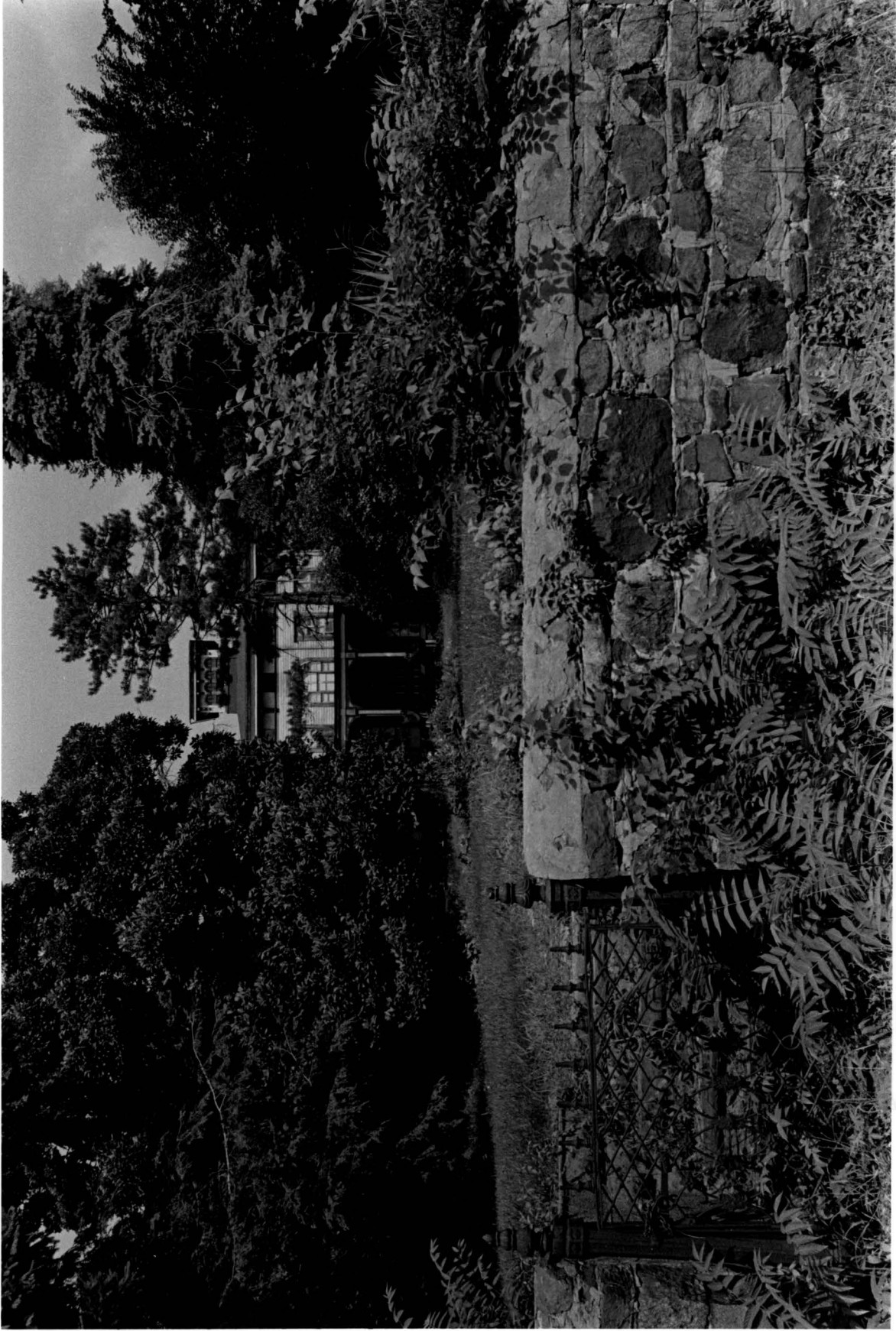
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GUSTAVE MAYER HOUSE - Front Yard, Gate, and Wall



GUSTAVE MAYER HOUSE - Front (Southeast) Facade



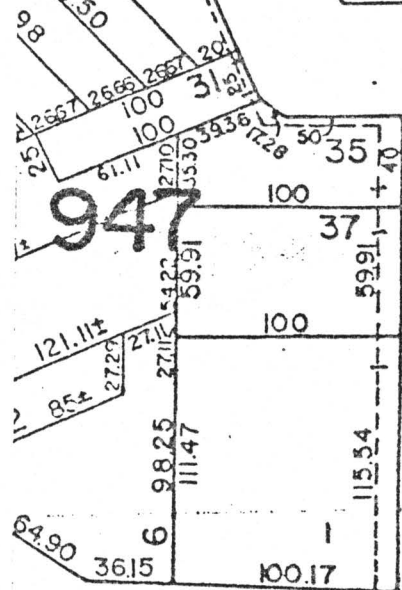
GUSTAVE MAYER HOUSE - East Corner of House



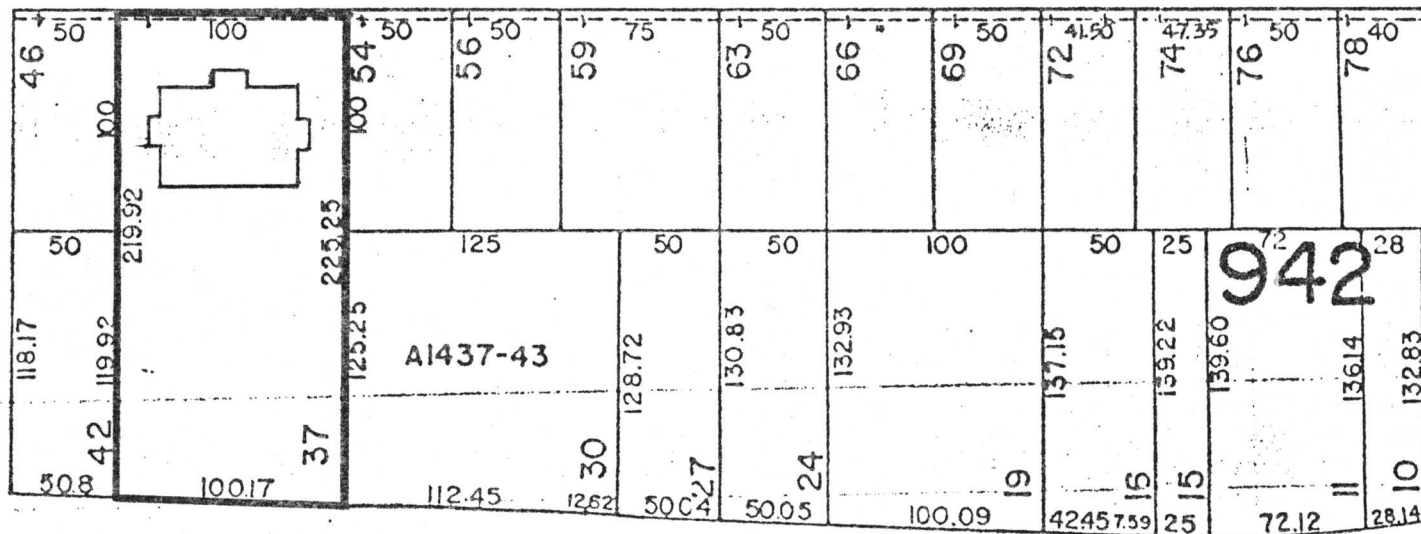
GUSTAVE MAYER HOUSE - Rear (Northwest) Elevation, Detail



GUSTAVE MAYER HOUSE - Rear (Northwest) Elevation, Detail



ODIN UNION PL. ST.



RICHMOND RD

source: current tax map

Gustave A. Mayer House

2475 RICHMOND ROAD, STATEN ISLAND Block 942, Lot 37

LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION.

LP-1652 Designated March 21, 1989