

KREISCHERVILLE WORKERS' HOUSES, 81-83 Kreisler Street, Charleston.
Built c. 1890, architect/builder unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7590, Lots 136 and 137 and the portions of the sidewalk and tree lawn immediately adjacent to these buildings, extending to the roadbed of Kreisler Street.

On October 1, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Kreischerville Workers' Houses: 81-83 Kreisler Street, Staten Island, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). Several people – including Charles Sachs, Barnett Shepherd of the Staten Island Historical Society, representatives of the Municipal Art Society, the Society for the Architecture of the City, and the Preservation League of Staten Island, and other individuals – testified in favor of designating 81-83 Kreisler Street, the related Workers' Houses, and the other calendared items located in Charleston. Borough President Guy Molinari, and City Councilman Alfred C. Cerullo, III, had reservations about the individual designation of the property. Irene Belansky, who with Mary Belansky, owns the Kreisler Street houses, expressed opposition to individual designation with the existing zoning and were supported in that position by the Charleston Civic Association and Staten Island Community Board No. 3.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Kreischerville Workers' Houses at 81-83 Kreisler Street, part of a group of four identical double houses, are some of the most readily identifiable of the worker housing erected during the nineteenth century in Kreischerville and other small Staten Island villages that grew up around manufacturing enterprises. Nos. 81-83, and the adjacent houses, were built around 1890 on a site that was quite near to the Kreisler brick manufacturing works (no longer standing), where the first occupants worked, and originally faced a row of similar houses on the west side of Kreisler Street. The structure survives as an element of the company-town character that prevailed in Kreischerville, as the village of Androveteville came to be known during the nineteenth century when the Kreisler brick works was a thriving concern. The houses were developed by Peter Androvette, a prominent member of a local family, who participated in the nineteenth-century evolution of the hamlet of Androveteville into the village of Kreischerville. The construction of these houses by Androvette demonstrates the quasi-company-town nature of Kreischerville, where the control of the dominant industrial firm was tempered by older development and local interests which gradually combined. The modest size and lack of ornamental elements of the wood-framed, shingle-clad structure, which has entrances made more private by their side porch location, are characteristic of worker housing of the time, particularly the common semi-detached cottage. The company town setting of the houses is reinforced by the siting of Nos. 81-83 and the neighboring double houses close together and near the street, and is enhanced by the picket fence and a walk laid in Kreisler brick. Nos. 81-83 were leased by Androvette to laborers who were employed at the brick works in Kreischerville and other nearby industries. Since 1923 the houses have been owned by members of the Janos Szucs family, part of the Hungarian community that has made Charleston its home since the early twentieth century.

Some of the company towns developed during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were part of the reaction to housing problems and labor unrest in congested urban manufacturing areas. In conjunction with the reform movement in this country, the development of "model," well-planned company towns was considered a practical ploy to attract and retain workers and became an expression of what has been termed "profitable paternalism." By the end of the nineteenth century, company-provided housing was considered a management tool to be used in conjunction with the construction of manufacturing plants in less-congested rural areas to stabilize the labor force. The construction of churches and community buildings, while welcomed by the workforce, nevertheless reflected the paternalistic attitude of many industrialists.

Industrial Housing. The earliest company-owned houses erected in the United States were the identical freestanding cottages erected for families that worked in textile mills in Rhode Island and other New England states during the early nineteenth century. The houses, built close together in neat, equally-spaced rows or clusters, presented a departure from contemporary domestic settings. Multi-family apartment buildings, usually referred to as tenements, were also constructed in combination with double houses, as was common in Europe. Managers of different ranks were provided with various sizes of single-family cottages which were usually considerably smaller than the owner or superintendent's residence.

The company-owned housing erected for workers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remained a combination of boardinghouses, semi-detached cottages, and detached dwellings, and the standards set by early cottages as small, sound, yet minimally-ornamented structures similar to contemporary domestic structures have endured. The housing built in company towns had several recognizable characteristics, primarily its rigid uniformity within each type found in a town. The structures were often arranged in closely-spaced rows with minimal front yards. The predominant dwelling types were the semi-detached and free-standing houses meant to be occupied by married employees, who were considered to be more stable laborers than single men and women (who were often required to live in boarding houses). Worker housing was generally constructed as economically as possible, in part because resale value was not a consideration, and such housing usually lacked the amenities of indoor plumbing and running water although electricity was

sometimes provided by the industry's generating system. The standard worker house was a plain, two-story, balloon-framed dwelling of four to six rooms.

Kreischerville – A Quasi-Company Town. Kreischerville was one of several villages that grew up near manufacturing enterprises on Staten Island during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Kreischerville, the earlier Factoryville (established in 1819 around Barrett & Tileston's New York Dyeing and Printing establishment in the north shore section subsequently known as West New Brighton) and the later Linoleumville (near the 1874 American Linoleum works on Long Neck, formerly and once again known as Travis) appear to have been quasi-company towns due to the presence of older development and local interests. There are probably many other areas of New York City where initial housing development was prompted by – but not totally controlled by – the establishment of one or more industrial operations.

Most of the housing in New York City built specifically for workers took the form of tenement houses and rowhouses. Although double houses are not uncommon throughout the city, many were built in groups as speculative developments, not as housing for workers of a particular industry. Consequently, the group of houses on Kreischer Street that includes Nos. 81-83, is a rare surviving cluster of worker housing built within what is now New York City for the employees of a specific business. The distinctive streetscape created by Nos. 81-83 and the neighboring houses is one of the most readily identifiable elements of the quasi-company town character that Charleston had as Kreischerville during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In houses like those on Kreischer Street lived some of the laborers who helped to make New York City the manufacturing center that it was during that period.

The village of Kreischerville reflects many common developmental patterns of industrial communities during the mid- and late nineteenth century. Balthasar Kreischer located his works near both the essential raw material, fire clay, and water transportation. He then began to solve the housing problem with the construction of two tenement buildings which had small apartments for families; in building that type of structure, Kreischer was following the generally accepted practice of providing multiple dwellings for workers.¹⁵ By building housing, Kreischer stabilized his workforce and extended his control over both the workers and the physical setting. The construction of double, or semi-detached, houses, rather than more tenements,

on Androvette and Kreisler Streets reflected the evolving standards for working-class housing. The construction by Peter Androvette of the double houses on the east side of Kreisler Street, including Nos. 81-83, (which were nearly identical to those built by the Kreisler firm on the opposite side of the street) reflects both the lack of total control that the Kreisler family had over the village and also the physical character of a company town that Androvette chose to further. During the 1880s and 1890s, more house lots were sold by the Kreisler firm, Peter Androvette, and others, and the village

approached its peak of physical development. Ironically, not until Peter Androvette purchased the Kreisler firm assets in 1899, did Kreislerville most approach a standard company town with one truly dominant property owner; however, by that time, more residents owned their homes, and many were traveling outside of the village to work in nearby industries. The separate identity of the village was maintained, even after the influence of the Kreisler works waned, by the influx of Hungarian immigrants during the 1890s and early twentieth century.

No. 81-83 Kreisler Street

Around 1890 the double house at Nos. 71-73 Kreisler Street, along with three identical structures, was erected for Peter Androvette. Each structure was located near the center of its lot and the occupants shared an outhouse located at the rear, in the standard arrangement adopted for the double houses in Kreislerville. The double houses on Kreisler Street, though close to the brick works to the south, were separated from them by the Cutting property and Topper's Creek, which may have fed the large, shallow pond (or reservoir) created by the late 1890s on the east side of the street.

In 1900 Freida Bresser (a German immigrant) was head of the household at No. 81, where she lived with her son, Gustav, a machinist, and two daughters. Michael Kroll, a presser at the terra-cotta works occupied that half of the structure in 1910 and had three boarders. In 1920, Thomas Pilzer, a Polish immigrant who worked at the dental works in

Prince's Bay, lived in the house with his wife and four young children.

Simon Piecherta, a German day laborer, occupied No. 83 in 1900; still at the same address in 1910, Piecherta's occupation was then listed as a gardener. In 1920 John Kellerman, a Hungarian immigrant who worked at the chemical works, occupied that half of the house; his family had three boarders who worked at the Tottenville Copper Co. works and chemical works.

After the death of Peter Androvette, the property on which all four of the double houses stand was sold in 1923 to Janos (John) Szucs of nearby Green Ridge, Staten Island.¹⁶ By the 1930s, Szucs appears to have made 71 Kreisler Street his home. In 1949 Szucs sold to his daughter and son-in-law, Moses and Mary Belansky, the structure they occupied, Nos. 75-77. After Szucs' death in 1967, the houses passed to his heirs.¹⁷

Description

Nos. 81-83 Kreisler Street is a two-story wood-framed double house on a masonry foundation. The nearly flat roof, from which a brick chimney (stuccoed) projects, slopes to the rear of the house. The exterior walls are sheathed in wood shingles.¹⁸ A fascia and molding terminate the upper edges of the walls. The Kreisler Street facade (as does the rear facade) has four bays of windows which have one-over-one double-hung sash in plain frames (painted white). The entrances to the dwellings are through porches that extend along much of the side facades; the shed-roofed porches are open toward the front, with a square wood post supporting the corner of the roof. The rear portions of the porches are enclosed and have a window in the side wall and a door facing the street which is approached by a low stoop. There is no window in

the side wall of the porch at No. 81. The side walls have no window openings at the second story.

A narrow lawn, lined with trees and mail boxes on posts, separates a sidewalk laid in various hues of Kreisler brick from the street. The front and side yards of the structure are edged by a wood picket fence (supplemented by a stockade fence on the south side) which has gates supported by square posts at the brick walks that lead to the entrances; a perpendicular section of fence divides the front yards. The structure is located near to the street, leaving much of the rear of the lot free for gardens and outbuildings.

Report prepared by
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NOTES

1. In this report the current names of streets will be used, although many of the thoroughfares were known by different names during the nineteenth century, according to historic atlases and deed descriptions. Arthur Kill Road had many names, including Fresh Kills Road, Shore Road, and Riverside Avenue. Around the turn of the century, Winant Place was known as Weber Street, Manley Street was Maple Street, and Androvette Avenue might have been known as Steinway Avenue (after the Kreischer family's friends and in-laws, the William Steinway family of piano manufacturers).
2. Sources on Balthasar Kreischer and his business include: Mabel Abbott, "Kreischerville: A Forgotten Chapter in Staten Island History," *Proceedings of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences* 11 (Jan. 1949), 31-43; the Kreischer Papers, Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences (SIIAS); Charles William Leng & William T. Davis, *Staten Island and its People* (New York, 1930); *Prominent Men of Staten Island, 1893* (New York: A. Y. Hubbell, 1893); Richard M. Bayles, *History of Richmond County, Staten Island, New York* (New York, 1887); J.J. Clute, *Annals of Staten Island, from Its Discovery to the Present Time* (New York, Press of Chas. Vogt, 1877); Asher & Adams, *Pictorial Guide to American Industry* (1876, rpt. New York, Routledge Books, 1876), 82; and Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York* (Boston, 1892), 880, 881, 886, 887.
3. Though the name of the Kreischer firm changed as the sons joined the firm, perhaps it was best known as B. Kreischer & Sons.
4. Information on Peter Androvette was compiled from "Captain Peter Androvette," *Prominent Men of Staten Island, 1893*, 99; "Murray J. Androvette, Sr." in Leng & Davis, 130; deed transactions recorded in the Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; Staten Island directories; and transactions between the Kreischer family and Peter Androvette recorded in the Kreischer Papers, SIIAS.
5. Androvette and members of the Kreischer family co-owned the *Caroline Kreischer* (named after Balthasar Kreischer's daughter), the steam propeller *Lizzie M. Conklin*, the schooner *Mary Heitman*, canal boats like the *R.K. Rathburn* and barges, including the *Fire Brick* and the *Chas. Moore*, according to documents in the Kreischer papers, SIIAS.
6. Peter Androvette, James Murray Androvette, and Charles H. Puls contributed equal shares of \$1000 to the corporation's capital of \$100,000. The extent to which the Kreischer Brick Manufacturing Company carried out its intent to produce front and fire brick, clay retorts, tile, glazed brick and other articles has not been determined. The Kreischer Brick works was shown on the 1898 (corrected to 1911) Sanborn Map as the B. Kreischer & Son, Front Brick Works, and the Anderson New York Pressed Brick factory was labeled as the Richmond Brick & Tile Company (and noted as owned by John Weber and not in operation). The Kreischer name passed to the Kreischer Clay Products, Inc. firm that was incorporated in 1921 with directors from the New York and New Jersey area who were not members of either the Kreischer or Androvette families.
7. This section on Kreischerville is based on numerous deeds in the Richmond County, Office of the Register; *The Standard Directory of Richmond County for the Year 1893-1894* (New Brighton, NY: Robert Humphrey, 1893); *United States Census, Richmond County, New York* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1870, 1900, 1910, and 1920); the New York State Census listings for 1875 and 1915; S.C. Judson, *Illustrated Sketch Book of Staten Island, New York, Its Industries and Commerce* (New York: S.C. Judson, 1886); Gustav Kobbé, *Staten Island: A Guide Book, with Illustrations and a Road Map* (New York; Gustav Kobbé, 1890); Clute; *Staten Island Illustrated*, Borough of Richmond, New York City (New Brighton: Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, 1911); Shirley Zavin and Elsa Gilbertson, "Kreischerville/Charleston Walking Tour" in *Staten Island Walking Tours* (Preservation League of Staten Island, 1986); Charles L. Sachs, *Made on Staten Island: Agriculture, Industry, and Suburban Living in the City* (New York: Staten Island Historical Society, 1988); and the following maps: F.H. Walling, *Map of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York* (New York: D.A. Fox, 1859); F.W. Beers, *Atlas of Staten Island, New York* (New York: J.B. Beers & Co., 1874); J.B. Beers, *Atlas of Staten Island, Richmond Co., New York* (New York: L.E. Neuman & Co., 1887); *Insurance Maps of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York* (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1898, corrected to 1911); *Atlas of the Borough of Richmond, City of New York*, 2nd ed. (New York: E. Robinson, 1907); *Borough of Richmond, Topographical Survey* (New York, Sept. 1913).
8. *The Manufacturer and Builder* noted in 1869 that Kreischer was "erecting a number of similar houses on his own property," after stating that the improvements on the Staten Island Railroad, "with which Mr. Kreischer is identified

as the founder, in the shape of substantial dwelling houses for mechanics, were progressing." The reporter could have been referring to the tenements or some of the other houses erected by Kreisler, such as the several double houses on Androvette Street.

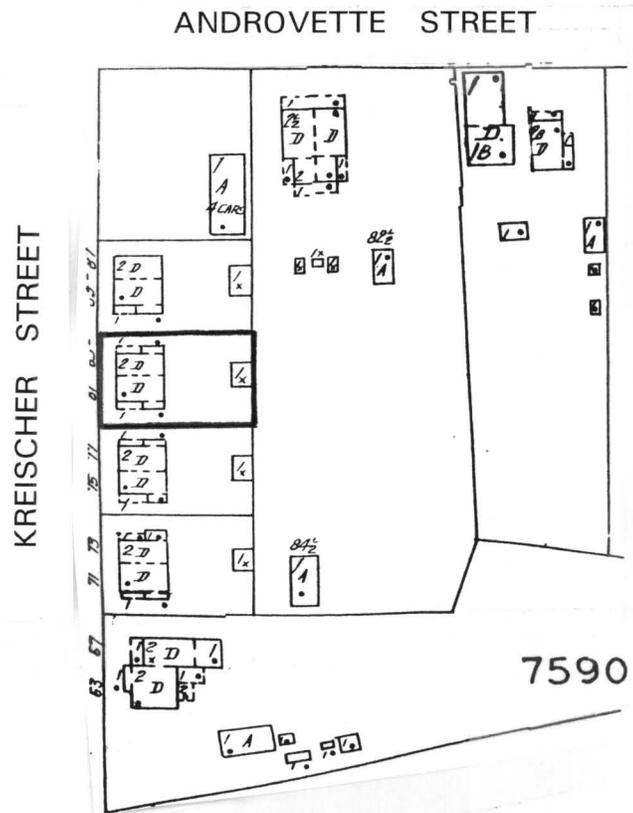
9. Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber 116, p. 614 and Liber 134, p. 43.
10. The period of construction of Androvette's double houses is bracketed by the 1887 Beers Atlas, in which the houses do not appear, and the 1898 atlases in which the houses are depicted. The deed for the lot Androvette sold to Cutting in 1892 makes no mention of the houses, as was common at the time, but may suggest the time when development took place on the east side of Kreisler Street. The construction of the houses could have been prompted by establishment of the New York Anderson Pressed Brick factory in 1887 or even the expansion of Androvette's own business in 1890. Androvette acquired several mortgages during the 1880s and 1890; most of those documents were unavailable at the time this report was prepared.
11. According to the Federal Census, the village had fifty-six households in 1880; Judson gives the figure of 800 inhabitants in Kreislerville in 1886.
12. Kreisler's paternalistic dominance of the village is recounted in "Balthasar Kreisler's Memory to be Honored Tomorrow by Steuben Society Ceremony," *Staten Island Transcript*, May 29, 1936, Kreisler Papers, SIIAS and by Abbott, p. 36-37.
13. The brick works closed briefly in 1906 during a building slump and for good in 1927 according to William Franz, "For Half-Century, Kilns Burned," *Staten Island Advance*, Mar. 27, 1986, and "City Rural Area is Dying Slowly," *New York Times*, August 1966, Kreislerville Vertical File, The Staten Island Historical Society; and "Thoughts at Random -- Kreisler & Kaolin," *Staten Island Transcript*, April 10, 1936.
14. This section is based on the definitions and analysis of company towns in John Garner, *The Model Company Town: Urban Design through Private Enterprise in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) and Garner's Introduction in *The Company Town* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-14, and Margaret M. Mulrooney, *A Legacy of Coal: The Coal Company towns of Southwestern Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, 1989), Chapter 2, "The Coal Company Town," 9-29.
15. Through the last decades of the nineteenth century, most of the published information available in the United States on worker housing came from England and Europe, suggesting a lingering European influence on industrialists, many of whom were immigrants like Kreisler. Indeed, the first comprehensive report on the factory system and worker housing in the United States, prepared by Carroll Wright in conjunction with the 1880 Federal Census of Manufacturers, featured examples of worker housing from Europe and his extensive bibliography contained mostly European sources. Other early American offerings on the subject of worker housing include "The Exhibit of the United States Bureau of Labor at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition," *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor* 54 (Sept. 1904), 1191-1242; after 1910 American literature on the subject becomes much more extensive.
16. Several years earlier, a mortgage from Janos Szucs had made possible the purchase of the nearby St. Peter's German Evangelical Church (a designated New York City Landmark) by the Magyar Reformed Church (now Free Magyar Reformed Church). See LPC, *St. Peter's German Evangelical Church at Kreislerville Designation Report*, report prepared by Betsy Bradley (New York: City of New York, 1994).
17. Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 691, p. 52; Liber 572, p. 149; Liber 1083, p. 474; Liber 1883, pp. 195, 197, 199, 201; Liber 1884, p. 298.
18. A 1937 photograph (from the collection of the Staten Island Historical society) indicates how little the houses have been altered; in that photograph, the shingles appear to be weathering. The one change to the facade is the exterior-mounted air conditioner unit on the facade of No. 81.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Kreischerville Workers' Houses, Nos. 81-83 Kreischer Street, 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 Kreischerville Workers' Houses at 81-83 Kreischer Street, part of a group of four identical double houses, are some of the most readily identifiable of the worker housing erected during the nineteenth century in Kreischerville and other small Staten Island villages that grew up around manufacturing enterprises; that Nos. 81-83 and the adjacent houses were built around 1890 on a site that was quite near to the Kreischer brick manufacturing works (no longer standing), where the first occupants worked and originally faced a row of similar houses on the west side of Kreischer Street; that the structure is a surviving element of the company town character that prevailed in Kreischerville, as the village of Androvetteville came to be known during the late nineteenth century when the Kreischer brick works was a thriving concern; that the houses were developed by Peter Androvette, a prominent member of a local family, who participated in the nineteenth-century evolution of the hamlet of Androvetteville into the village of Kreischerville; that the construction of these houses by Androvette demonstrates the quasi-company town nature of Kreischerville where the control of the dominant industrial firm was tempered by older development and local interests which gradually combined; that the modest size and lack of ornamental elements of the wood-framed and shingle-clad structure, which has entrances made more private by their side porch location, are characteristic of worker housing of the time, particularly the common semi-detached cottage; that the company town setting of the houses is reinforced by the siting of Nos. 81-83 and the neighboring double houses close together and near the street, and is enhanced by the picket fence and a walk laid in Kreischer brick; that Nos. 81-83 were leased by Androvette to laborers who were employed at the brick works in Kreischerville and other nearby industries, some of the workers who helped to make New York City the manufacturing center it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and that since 1923 the houses have been owned by members of the Janos Szucs family, part of the Hungarian community that has made Charleston its home since the early twentieth century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Kreischerville Workers' Houses, 81-83 Kreischer Street, Charleston and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7590, Lots 136 and 137 and the portions of the sidewalk and tree lawn immediately adjacent to these buildings, extending to the roadbed of Kreischer Street, as its Landmark Site.



Kreischerville Workers' Houses, 81-83 Kreischer Street, Charleston.

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Kreischer Street, 1937. Kreischer Street Houses are on the left.
Photograph by Percy Sperr is from the Staten Island Historical Society.



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