Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 11, 2004, Designation List 352
LP-2152

F. J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1887; architect: F.J. Berlenbach, Jr.; builder: F. J. Berlenbach.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3053, Lot 13.

On April 20, 2004, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of F.J. Berlenbach House and the related landmark site. The public hearing was duly advertised with the provisions of law. Three witnesses testified in favor of the proposed designation, including representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, and the Municipal Arts Society. There were no speakers in opposition to the proposed designation. The Commission held previous public hearings on the proposed designation on November 10, 1981 (LP-1263), June 12, 1984 (LP-1503), and July 10, 1990 (LP-1791).

Summary

Located in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the Berlenbach House is an extraordinary Queen Anne-style survivor from the last decades of the nineteenth century. The three-story frame building was constructed in 1887 by local carpenter Franz J. Berlenbach, a German immigrant, from plans drawn by his son, F.J., Jr., a young architect who had recently opened a design office nearby. The Berlenbach family occupied the house until 1899. The great wave of immigration that New York City experienced in the 1850s brought a large number of German immigrants to Williamsburg. Its population in the late nineteenth century was almost exclusively German. While most of the older wood-frame buildings in this section of Brooklyn have been resurfaced with new materials, this house not only retains its original clapboard siding, but features inventive wood carving. The design reflects the American version of the Queen Anne style's exuberant use of ornament and an animated treatment of the wall surface. The house is distinguished by its densely textured carving, including an entrance hood, bands of foliate ornament, incised sun designs, and vertical and wavy half-timber forms. Crowning the building is a bracketed cornice with a paneled frieze, above which is a pediment with a carved band ornamented by a mask that glares at the viewers below and a sunburst tympanum. Adding to the complex textures of the facade are a segmental-arched stained-glass transom at the first story and tinted small-paned windows in the upper sash. The house, which is a rare example of its style, remains remarkably intact.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Development in the Eastern District[1]

During the early nineteenth century, the portion of present-day Brooklyn between the village of Williamsburgh and Newtown Creek was a rural farm area dotted by small settlements. Beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century, at the time the ferries to Manhattan were initiated, the Williamsburgh and Jamaica Plank Road was established on the route of the present-day Metropolitan Avenue. Around the same time, the Newtown and Bushwick Turnpike, also known as the North Road to Newtown, was built on the present-day Meeker Avenue. The turnpike crossed Newtown Creek at a site where a ferry had operated since the late 1600s; in 1836 a toll bridge was built which came to be known as the "Penny Bridge" after the fee charged to pedestrians. Bushwick Avenue, which connected with Humboldt Street, was an important north-south route.

In 1835, the village of Williamsburgh grew eastward from its original boundary around Bushwick Creek and the present-day Union Avenue over to Bushwick Avenue, encompassing the area that came to be known as the "New Village." In 1855, when the cities of Brooklyn and Williamsburgh and the town of Bushwick formed the consolidated City of Brooklyn, the sixteenth ward, which is the location of the Berlenbach House, was created; it included the eastern section of Williamsburgh and a portion of Bushwick. Also known as the Eastern District, it was laid out with streets in the early 1850s, and rapidly changed from a rural area with small farms to an urban neighborhood. Humboldt Street, one of the area's major streets, was opened in 1852.[2]

During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Brooklyn's sixteenth ward became densely built-up with houses. Many of the small wood houses in the area had back houses or stables at the rear of the lots. Industrial operations began to locate on Newtown Creek and its west branch, known as "English Kills," as the waterway was improved with the deepening of its channel and the construction of bulkheads. Peter Cooper was one of the first industrialists to become interested in the area, and in the late 1840s he purchased a large tract on which he built a glue manufacturing works; the Cooper glue works, which relocated closer to Newtown Creek in the late 1870s, helped to establish the area as a center of noxious industrial works. The Bushwick Chemical Works, at Metropolitan and Grand Avenues on the English Kills channel, was another early industry among the lime, plaster, and brick works, coal yards, and other factories located in the area around the English Kills. These industries provided jobs for the area's growing population, which was made up mostly by German immigrants. By the late nineteenth century, Williamsburgh was often called *Dutchtown* because of its large German population. Meserole Street, in the vicinity of the Berlenbach House, was the location of several of Williamsburgh's major German social organizations, such as the Turn Verein at 53 to 65 Meserole Street and Williamsburgh Saenger Bund (demolished) at 134 to136 Meserole Street.[3] When the Berlenbach House was built in 1887, Meserole Street was contained a mix of wood and brick houses.

Design and Construction[4]

Franz Joseph Berlenbach (1825-c.1895) was born in Phalz, Germany, and settled in Williamsburgh in 1863 after having lived for a time in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A carpenter and builder by trade, Berlenbach purchased an existing house at 174 Meserole Street (then No. 152) in 1864.[5] This two-story, frame house and rear brick outbuilding were demolished in 1887 for the construction of the present house. That year, Berlenbach's oldest son, Francis J. Jr.[6] (1857-1944), an architect, filed plans with the Brooklyn Department of Buildings for a new three-story, frame tenement at 174 Meserole Street to cost $4,500. The elder Berlenbach was listed as the builder. Francis J., Jr., who was born in Milwaukee, is known to have been employed in the design office of James Renwick during the year 1880, but other details regarding his architectural training remain unestablished. Berlenbach opened his own design firm at 260 Graham Avenue in Brooklyn around 1885.

Both Berlenbachs were active in the construction trades in the greater Williamsburgh area during the late nineteenth century. A review of building applications in the neighborhood for the 1880s and 90s show that both men were involved in the building of mainly tenements and small residences. However, they appear to have collaborated in very few instances. The younger Berlenbach also developed a specialty in the design of buildings for local Roman Catholic churches, and served as an architectural consultant to the Archdiocese of Brooklyn and Sisters of the Order of St. Dominic. He designed the churches for the Brooklyn parishes of St. Finbar, the Assumption, St. Joseph, and the Blessed Sacrament. Among his Brooklyn commissions for the Dominicans were the Convent of the Order of St. Dominic (1889) at 56-64 Havemeyer Street and the Annunciation School at 70 Havemeyer Street (1892), both Romanesque in style.

He also designed the St. Aloysius R.C. Church (1907-1926) at 382 Onderdonk Avenue and the entire complex of the St. Matthias R.C. Parish (1908-1926), 5815 to 5831 Catalpa Avenue, both located in the nearby Ridgewood section of Queens.[7] Berlenbach favored the Italian Renaissance style for these later buildings, all of which are listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places as part of the Ridgewood Multiple Resource Area.

While Berlenbach favored the Romanesque mode for his early brick designs, he chose the ornate Queen Anne style for his father's house, possibly to take advantage of the older Berlenbach's skills as a carpenter. The Queen Anne style appeared in New York by the late 1870s, and was found mainly on commercial buildings and freestanding residences in suburban areas. In its most developed form, this exuberant style employed asymmetry, irregular rooflines and a variety of turrets, bay projections, and contrasting materials. It was not commonly used for urban row houses because of the difficulty of its application to the typically narrow building lots in New York. There are, however, a number of exceptions to this in which a row of buildings were designed to appear as a larger unified design. These are found in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The Berlenbach House is an unusual and intact example of a Queen Anne-style wood row house.

Description

The Berlenbach House uses modest materials, but the high quality of the carved detail is a tribute to the older Berlenbach's talent as a carpenter. The four bay wide building is typical of period tenement house design, but the architect attempted to create an asymmetrical appearance by placing the entrance door to one side and by crowning the building with an offset cornice and off-center pediment and a smaller, secondary pediment to one side. Except for the hood over the entrance door, there are no projecting features, but the clapboard facade abounds in richly carved panels in a variety of patterns and the windows contain colored glass panels.

The house occupies much of its 25 foot by 100 foot lot. It rises three stories and has a flat roof. Its wooden features include an entrance hood, bands of foliate ornament, incised sun designs, and vertical and wavy half-timber forms. Crowning the building is a bracketed cornice with a paneled frieze, above which is a pediment with a carved band ornamented by a mask that glares at the viewer below, and a sunburst tympanum. Adding to the texture of the facade are a segmental-arched, stained-glass transom at the first story and tinted, small-paned windows in the upper sash. The stoop consists of greystone slab steps with cast-iron rails. The areaway is enclosed by a decorative iron fence. Its exposed west elevation is covered with composition siding.

Later History

The neighborhood surrounding the Berlenbach House has changed greatly since the 1880s, while the house itself remains largely intact. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Congress Brewing Company had replaced most of the houses on the block directly across the street from the Berlenbach House. By the late 1920s, the brewery had been replaced by two, new law tenements facing Meserole Street, and the City Trust Bank occupied the building at the southeast corner of Graham Avenue. A number of buildings on the street were demolished in the mid-twentieth century and the lots remain vacant, including the lot adjacent to the Berlenbach House. As a result, its west elevation is now visible. Other surviving wooden houses in the area have been refaced with modern materials. The biggest change in the neighborhood was the redevelopment of twelve nearby blocks in 1936-37 by the New York City Housing Authority for the Williamsburg Houses.

Report prepared by
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NOTES

1. The following section is adapted from research by Betsy Bradley for the Landmarks Preservation Commission, *(former) 19th Police Precinct Station House and Stable Designation Report* (LP-1703), (New York, 1993), and includes the following sources: Eugene L. Armbruster, *Brooklyn's Eastern District* (Brooklyn: the author, 1942) and Henry R. Stiles, ed., *The Civil, Political, Professional and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York from 1683 to 1884* (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), and *Robinson's Atlas of the City of Brooklyn* (New York: E. Robinson, 1886); *Atlas of the Borough of Brooklyn, City of New York* (Brooklyn: E. Belcher Hyde, 1904); and *Desk Atlas, Borough of Brooklyn, City of New York*, Vol. 2 (New York: E. Belcher Hyde, 1929).

2. It was first known as Wyckoff Avenue and later as Smith Street, before being renamed Humboldt Street. The name of the street was changed in 1869 in honor of the German scientist, Alexander Humboldt.

3. Meserole Street, opened in 1848, was named for Abraham Meserole who owned several acres of land in the area prior to its development.

4. Brooklyn City Directories and Telephone Directories, 1857 to 1955; *Higginson's Insurance Maps of the City of Brooklyn*, surveyed, drawn & published by J.H. Higginson (New York & Brooklyn, 1868), plate 83; Francis W. Kervic, *Architects in America of Catholic Tradition* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuthill, 1962), 18; Kings County Registry of Deeds, Liber 605, p. 380; Charles Lockwood, *Bricks & Brownstone, The New York Row House, 1883-1929, An Architectural & Social History* (New York & others: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 231-233; National Register of Historic Places, *Ridgewood Multiple Resource Area*, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, (form prepared by Donald G. Presa, 1983); New York State Census of the Population for the Year 1880, City of Brooklyn, 16th Ward; *The Record and Guide* v. 39, no. 988, Feb. 19, 1887, p.252 (NB 197-1887).

5. Berlenbach also owned No. 178 Meserole Street.

6. Brooklyn directories over the years listed the older Berlenbach alternately as either Franz, Francis or Frank, while his son was listed as either Francis, Jr. or Frank Jr.

7. Roman Catholic parishes in Queens County fall under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Brooklyn.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the F.J. Berlenbach House has a special character and 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 F.J. Berlenbach House is an extraordinary Queen Anne-style survivor from the last decades of the nineteenth century; that the three-story frame building was constructed in 1887 by local carpenter Franz J. Berlenbach, a German immigrant, from plans drawn by his son, F.J., Jr., a young architect who had recently opened a design office nearby; that the Berlenbach family, which occupied the house until 1899, was part of the great wave of German immigrants that arrived in New York in the 1850s, a large number of which settled in Williamsburg; that while most of the older wood-frame buildings in this section of Brooklyn have been resurfaced with new materials, this house not only retains its original clapboard siding, but features inventive wood carving; that the design reflects the American version of the Queen Anne style's exuberant use of ornament and an animated treatment of the wall surface; that the house is distinguished by its densely textured carving, including an entrance hood, bands of foliate ornament, incised sun designs, and vertical and wavy half-timber forms; that crowning the building is a bracketed cornice with a paneled frieze, above which is a pediment with a carved band ornamented by a mask that glares at the viewers below and a sunburst tympanum; that adding to the complex textures of the facade are a segmental-arched stained-glass transom at the first story and tinted small-paned windows in the upper sash; and that the building remains remarkably intact.

Accordingly, pursuant to 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 F.J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3053, Lot 13 as its Landmark Site.



F. J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, Borough of Brooklyn.
Photo: Carl Forster, 2004.



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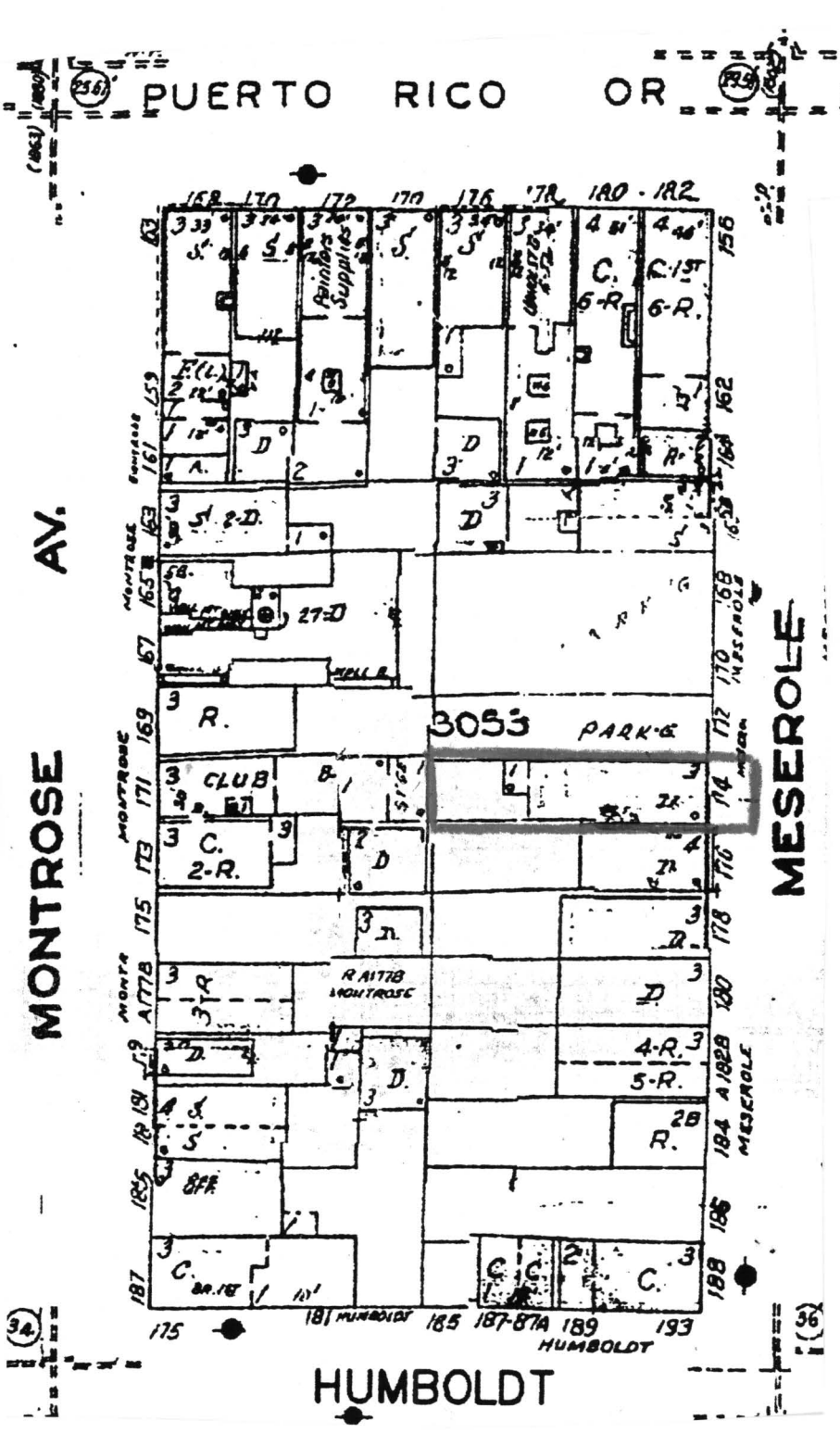
F. J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, Borough of Brooklyn. *Photo: Carl Forster, 2004.*



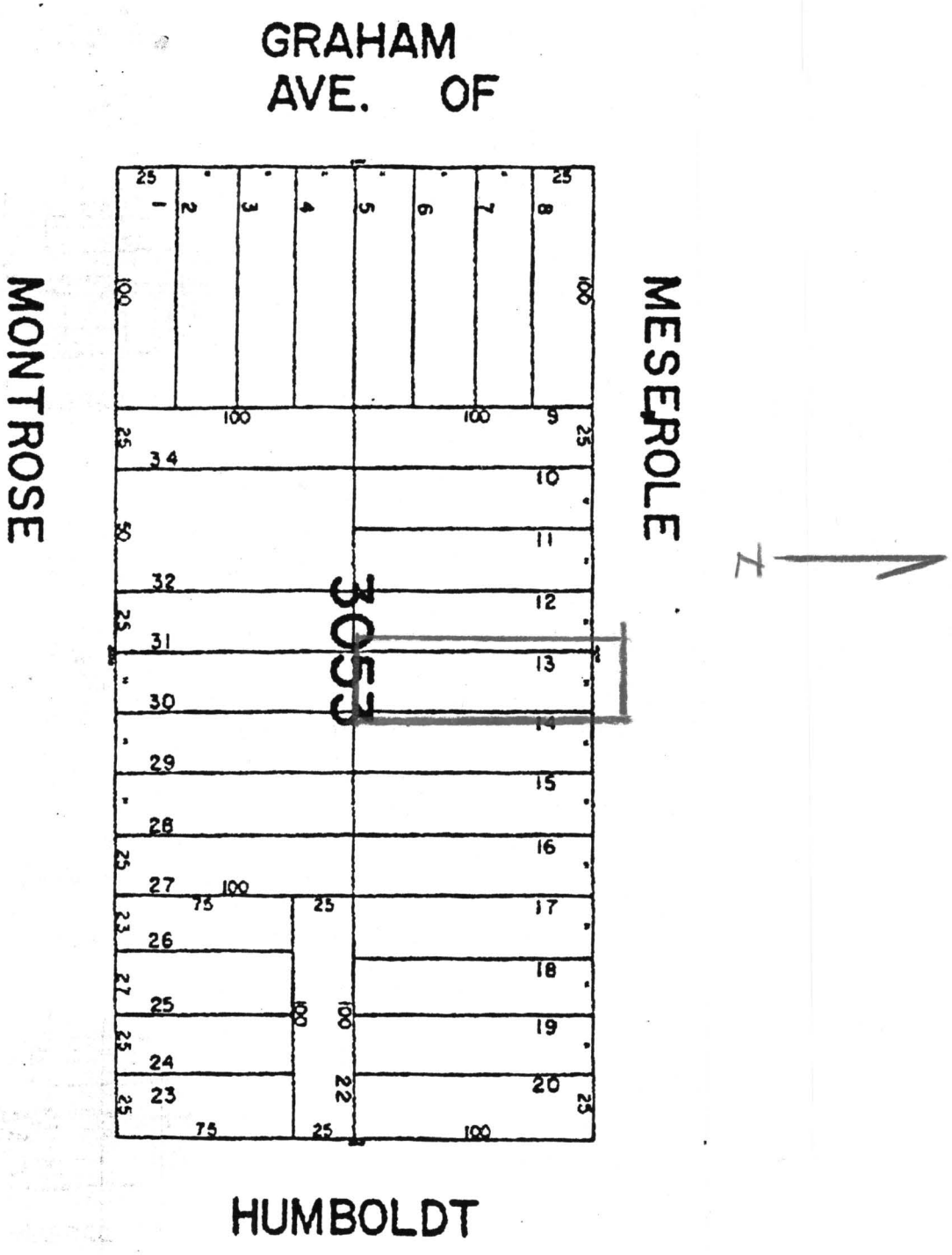
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F. J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, Borough of Brooklyn. *Landmark Site:* Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3053, Lot 13. Graphic Source: *The Sanborn Building and Property Atlas of Queens, New York*, 22nd ed. (Weehawken, NJ: First American, 2003), vol. 3, pl. 41.



F. J. Berlenbach House, 174 Meserole Street, Borough of Brooklyn. *Landmark Site:* Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3053, Lot 13. Graphic Source: *New York City Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map.*