

ERNEST FLAGG'S TODT HILL COTTAGES: WALLCOT, 285 Flagg Place, Borough of Staten Island. Built 1918-1921, architect Ernest Flagg.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 898, Lot 4.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Wallcot and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A letter has been received in support of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Completed in 1921, Wallcot is one of several small stone cottages built by Ernest Flagg on the grounds of his Todt Hill estate. Employing the architect's inventive cost-saving design and construction techniques, Wallcot demonstrates Flagg's conviction that economy and good design are not mutually exclusive. Flagg's Todt Hill cottages embody his pioneering vision of affordable housing which could fulfill the aspirations of a broad segment of the nation's population.

#### Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Estate

Stone Court, the country estate of the noted American architect Ernest Flagg, is located on Todt Hill, part of the central ridge of serpentine rock which bisects the northern half of Staten Island. Flagg's imposing Colonial Revival style residence, several outbuildings and the nearby stone cottages he constructed on the grounds of his estate form a harmonious ensemble which exemplifies the architect's distinctive interpretation of Beaux-Arts inspired design principles as well as his life-long commitment to building reform.

Born in Brooklyn in 1857, Flagg was a member of the first generation of American architects shaped by the rigorous training programs of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Returning to this country in the 1880s and 1890s, Flagg and his contemporaries were imbued with an awareness of an architectural beauty governed by the constant principles of correct design discovered by the ancients and recovered by the architects of the Renaissance. Flagg's career, initiated by his competition-winning design of 1892 for St. Luke's Hospital on Morningside Heights, has been characterized as one which embraced seemingly disparate projects ranging from imposing residences for affluent clients and large institutional complexes to workers' housing. These were but the outward manifestations

of an architectural sensibility which sought always to mediate the general polarities implied by the terms "art" and "science." Flagg noted, for instance, that the entire design of St. Luke's Hospital, from its plan to the placement of ornamental elements, was determined by his employment of a modular unit of measure, a methodology inspired by his analysis of Greek architecture and repeated in his subsequent designs such as those for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1894-1898) and the Naval Academy at Annapolis (1897-1899).<sup>1</sup> Flagg also recorded that, "Even for tenements it has worked well and plans for several large groups of model fireproof tenements (N.Y. Fireproof Model Tenements, 1899-1900) were made this way."<sup>2</sup>

Flagg was introduced to Staten Island by its first Borough President George Cromwell and in 1898 Flagg purchased a lot adjacent to Cromwell's Todt Hill property. Fronting on Prospect Place (today's Flagg Place), it offered spectacular views of the Lower New York Bay and the Atlantic Highlands. Set upon a large terrace defined by rubblestone walls and occupying the most elevated portion of his property, Flagg's residence was a substantial structure of whitewashed fieldstone and shingles. The construction material and the gambrel roof alluded to the local Colonial building tradition which Flagg defined as French Huguenot. Numerous permutations of the colonial tradition were introduced by Flagg; they include a vastly enlarged scale, massive chimneys rising above the eaves on the front and rear elevations, and a circular balustraded observation deck which, straddling the roof ridge and enframed by the chimneys, marked the central axis bisecting the house and its grounds. Subsequent additions to the residence, the siting of outbuildings and the design of the landscape were all undertaken in reference to this axis. In addition to demonstrating Flagg's individualized Beaux-Arts-derived aesthetic, the estate also reveals, from its inception, the architect's interest in building technology. The chimneys, for example, are topped by distinctive curved ventilator caps which were painted black; intended to improve the efficiency of the heating system, the curved ventilator cap became one of the hallmarks of his Todt Hill designs. Continuing change, constant elaboration and ongoing experimentation are intrinsic to the history of Flagg's Todt Hill estate; the series of small stone cottages he constructed beginning in 1916 may in some respects be regarded as the culmination of the building program initiated in 1898.

As a young man Flagg had been involved in land and building speculation with his father and brother in the 1870s and 1880s. It was an experience which surely played a formative role in shaping Flagg's visionary development scheme for his Staten Island properties. Just after the turn of the century Flagg began buying additional tracts of land on Todt Hill. By 1907 he had acquired approximately 70 acres in the vicinity of his original purchase and in 1909 he established the Flagg Estate Company. The total of 200 acres Flagg owned by 1918 extended southwestward from West Entry Road to the far side of Todt Hill Road where his extensive holdings included much of what is today the Richmond County Country Club golf course.

Concurrently, Flagg was also involved in a number of projects entailing additions to his residence and its immediate grounds. The residence gained added grandeur with the construction of a wing on the southwestern side which balanced the earlier wing opposite. A second level

was added to the facade porch; its colonnade repeated the forms of the newly elaborated colonnade below. The terrace platform was extended and the landscaping formalized. Low fieldstone wings were added to the rear of his residence, a new gardener's residence was constructed in 1908, and the earlier gardener's residence on Flagg Place was subsequently enlarged and converted to a gatehouse. Although conventional rubblestone construction was used for the smaller structures, their scale and design elements predict the architect's experimental cottages. Foreshadowing Bowcot, for example, the new gardener's residence abutted and incorporated a portion of an existing stone retaining wall.

### Small Houses: Their Economic Design & Construction

Flagg's new additions to his residence de-emphasized its Colonial Revival character; so too did his contemporary removal of whitewash from much of the estate's rubblestone construction. Revelation of Stone Court's stone represented far more than a cosmetic change. Stone construction lay at the heart of his ambitious development plan, the "Flagg Ridge Estate of Ernest Flagg at Dongan Hills, Staten Island," outlined in his book Small Houses: Their Economic Design and Construction published in 1922. Drawing upon prototypes of greater antiquity than those provided by the local Colonial building tradition, Flagg envisioned his Todt Hill lands populated by many small stone houses, an ensemble which would evoke the ancient Anglo-French or Norman villages of England and France. Stone, described by Flagg as "king of building materials," was selected for very practical reasons as well. The cost of wood increased during the post-World-War-I period due to a diminishing supply. Reduced combustibility was another benefit of stone construction.

By his use of an earlier spelling of the family name, Flagg conferred ancestral and manorial character upon his proposed development, associations perhaps related to the concomitant aggrandizement of his residence and its grounds. The Flagg Ridge Estate was conceived as more than a picturesque enclave for the privileged however. It would also demonstrate that Flagg's inventive cost-saving but improved construction methods could make the American dream of a single-family house attainable by a broadened segment of the country's population. Affordability was not to be the altar upon which good design was sacrificed. On the contrary, as Flagg pointed out in his introduction to Small Houses, "... the theory for the design of these houses is that the most economical way of obtaining good results is to apply the greater fundamental principles of art and depend upon them for beauty rather than upon the use either of applied ornament or more expensive materials..."<sup>3</sup>

Economy was to be achieved by a host of means which Flagg divided into five general categories. Economical plan preparation entailed the use of a modular system. Subdivisions of a three-foot nine-inch modular unit chosen for its relationship to standard lengths of building materials corresponded to the grid of specially prepared graph paper.<sup>4</sup> Economy was also obtained either through the utilization of under-used spaces or their elimination. Attics, for example, were enlarged through the use of tall, wide-spreading roofs and rendered habitable by the introduction of ridge-line dormers which provided ample light and controllable ventilation. Hallways and corridors were abandoned while frequently wasted odd spaces were provided

with lockers and cupboards. Reduction of the construction materials required was another area in which costs could be lowered. Wall heights, for instance, diminished as a result of the inhabitable attic story. Foundations shrank and cellars were eliminated by the damp-proofing methods introduced by Flagg. The architect's ingenious method of partition-wall construction -- plaster applied to a jute or burlap screen -- made studs and lath unnecessary. The much thinner (and fire-proof) walls which resulted also took up less space. Trim, baseboards and molding were dispensed with.

Flagg's fourth method of economizing entailed decreasing labor costs. A method of concrete wall-construction Flagg called "mosaic rubble" was one of the principal means of accomplishing this goal since it eliminated the need for skilled workmen. Flagg devised a system of reusable formwork consisting of uprights and cross-bars on foundation sleepers. These formed a trough into which stones could be placed -- their flat sides flush with the outer face of the wall -- to form a mosaic pattern which evoked conventional rubblestone construction. Concrete was poured around the stones to form a backing. The formwork was subsequently reassembled at a higher point and the process repeated. When the wall was completed only face-pointing was required. Lastly Flagg cites a number of "more economical devices, materials and methods" which range from construction details -- for these Flagg produced many patented designs -- to siting. Structures which conformed to the terrain, for example, eliminated the cost of extensive excavation and grading while adopting the European tradition of a roadside location represented an economical use of the land.

### Wallcot

Wallcot, known also as House-on-the-Wall, was begun in 1918 and completed in 1921. Fronting on Flagg Place some 500' southwest of the architect's lot, it is a roadside pendant to Flagg's earlier stone cottage -- Bowcot -- sited in a comparable location of the northeastern edge of his estate. The building occupies an embankment which Flagg described in Small Houses as being about 4' above the level of the road. <sup>5</sup> Although a 1909 topographical map indicates that a retaining wall extended along this section of Flagg Place, Flagg appears not to have incorporated it into this structure. The new retaining wall built by Flagg along the embankment and its upward extension which comprise Wallcot's principal facade and the lower flanking continuations of this wall are, as Flagg noted, "set a few feet back from the building line, thus making the road appear wider in front of it." Flagg Place bends slightly northward just northeast of the main facade, but the facade wall and retaining wall extensions, unlike Bowcot's curved walls which follow the course of the road, form a perfectly straight line. Wallcot's relationship to the roadway is, as a result, less picturesque.

From another vantage point, however, Wallcot's picturesqueness appears. Behind the house the terrain continues to slope upward. On this higher ground Flagg constructed a garage building which also housed a small apartment for the chauffeur. It is set at right angles to the main section of the house; the northeast walls of the two structures are aligned. A post-1947 structure now links the garage and house to form the existing L-shaped plan. Because the slope continues its upward rise beyond the garage

to Iron Mine Drive at the rear of the property (a modern street proposed by in a development plan devised by Flagg toward the end of his life but not constructed until after his death in 1947), the view of Wallcot from this thoroughfare, its gable peaks rising above the contours of the slope, is of a house which, in Flagg's words, "is hugging tight, as it were, to Mother Earth." <sup>6</sup> Wallcot, like Bowcot seems to nestle into the terrain and into its landscaped setting of large trees, lawns and shrubs.

Wallcot is comprised of two sections, both rectangular in plan. The smaller and lower southwestern portion which houses the living room is one story in height and three bays wide. The northeastern bay on the Flagg Place elevation is occupied by the main entranceway which leads to a wide entry hall. The larger and deeper main section is also three bays wide but one-and-a-half stories high. A dining room, two large bedrooms and, originally, two smaller bedrooms for servants were located on the principal floor. Two large bedrooms take up the attic story. The garage is a long rectangular one-story structure. The chauffeur's apartment was located at its northwestern end; the garage portion of the building, emphasized by a projecting gabled portico on the southwestern elevation, is reached from Flagg Place by a curving driveway. A later spur off this driveway continues toward the rear of the property and exits onto Iron Mine Drive. The post-1947 structure which links the house and garage is also one-story in height.

The stone employed for Wallcot's mosaic-rubble construction is the light green serpentine or soapstone taken from the quarry Flagg had established on the grounds of his estate. <sup>7</sup> The existing sandy-colored face-pointing mortar probably replaces mortar that was similar to the rose-colored mortar used at Bowcot. Because the joints have a rounded profile and considerable foliation has occurred behind them, the face-pointing is a more prominent visual element than originally intended. <sup>8</sup>

Wallcot's design is one of the more than fifty Flagg included in Small Houses. There is a clear familial relationship amongst them, a result of the economical design and construction features they all share. But Flagg's Small House designs also demonstrated that uniformity need not be the inevitable product of economical construction. Diversity is achieved, for example, through differing juxtapositions of variously scaled masses. Plans are varied in response to distinctive topographies. There are endless variations in the placement and scale of such elements as windows, doorways, dormers and chimneys. And, although "picturesque" is an appropriate descriptive term for all of the designs in Small Houses, that quality is counter-balanced with varying degrees of formalism.

As Flagg's comments make clear, Wallcot's design provides a studied contrast to the more thoroughly picturesque Bowcot. For example, while the house and garage were originally two separate structures, Flagg thought of them as an ensemble, noting that "...the garage adds much to the appearance of the house; the two buildings together form a group possessing importance and dignity, which neither would have singly." The same quality is mentioned by Flagg in reference to the design of the main facade.

Discussing the long retaining walls which flank the house he observed, "...how large a part in the composition is played by the stone retaining wall. Without them the house would lose half its importance and the whole character of the design would be changed. The wall not only adds

as much to the composition as the house itself, but lifts it out of the ordinary." One notes that the cost of this design element which contributed so greatly to the effect Flagg sought was relatively low. Originally the walls were terminated by large piers topped by urns. Only the pier on the southwestern wall survives today and the urns are gone, but the "importance" of the walls has been enhanced by the tall privet hedges planted along the embankment running behind them. (Photographs of Wallcot taken while it was still owned by Flagg show this same hedge at a much earlier stage of its growth.) Just to the northeast of the house an arched opening in the retaining wall leads to a flight of stairs providing access to the lawn area located on this side of the structure.

An imposing main entrance also proclaims Wallcot's "importance." Behind a wide, round-arched opening a flight of steps leads up through an open stone-walled vestibule once terminated by solid panelled doors which early views suggest were painted a dark color. The modern, more simply panelled doors are painted white. The decorative curvilinear ironwork in the upper portion of the arched openings remains however. Above the arched opening there is a large gabled hood-roof carried on enormous ornamental brackets. Flagg referred to it as forming a "sort of marquee so that one might alight from a vehicle under cover." The soffits of the eave and returns are adorned with mutules ornamented with large guttae; these alternate with plain panels. The bracket impost blocks each consist of three triglyphs; voids evoke metopes. This whimsical arrangement of classical motifs is, perhaps, Flagg's visible and affectionate tribute to the modular measure which underlies the design of his Todt Hill cottages. Flagg recorded in Small Houses that his study of classical temples have revealed to him that it was the triglyph which embodied and expressed the modular unit of measure employed by the architects of ancient Greece.<sup>9</sup>

Roof treatment also contributes to the formality of Wallcot's Flagg Place elevation. Evoking the idea of shelter and home, wide-spreading roofs cover both sections of the house. Except for the contrast resulting from the lower ridge line of the living-room section roof, the front slope extends across the width of the entire structure. As an imposing and unifying design element, it transcends the picturesque. Existing roofing appears to be composition shingles, a roofing material Flagg specifically rejected.<sup>10</sup> Originally rolled-roofing held in place by a fastening device patented by Flagg may have been used.

A variety of window types appear on this elevation. The major openings -- two in the living-room section and three in the main section -- employ casement windows which Flagg preferred to double-hung sash because they admit more air and, since they swing inward, are easier to wash. Setting the frames flush with the wall plane eliminated the need for reveals and stone sills. The main section casements break through the eaves and are topped by modest wood lintels. Today storm windows below the partially obscure the casements from view. Small square windows below the main section casements, similar to those used to illuminate Bowcot's basement level kitchen, served a similar function here. Three gabled dormers are located on the main section slope; above them there are three ridge dormers. Although four window types are used in this section, their placement in aligned rows both horizontally and vertically formalizes the variety. The two ridge-line dormers directly above the living-room casements repeat this pattern.

The brick end-chimneys terminated by Flagg's distinctive curved ventilator caps also demonstrate a similar restraint. These do not, unlike Bowcot's, break through the gable peak. Nor are they dynamic contributors, as are Bowcot's, to a picturesque roof design. Their relatively modest dimensions are in keeping with the scale of the other roof elements; they are part of the unified facade design.

The sobriety and formality of Wallcot's street facade design, a design which achieves the imposing effect Flagg desired, stand in contrast to the greater picturesqueness of the more private world behind it. As seen from the southwest, for example, the gable-wall of the living-room section, together with the slender-columned open porch on its northwestern elevation, is juxtaposed with the taller and wider main section gable-wall to the northeast. The end-wall gables of the house create an ensemble which contrasts with the gabled portico of the garage. The large-membered laticework which fills the gable peak, an original feature, emphasizes the relationship between them.

The roof slopes on this side of the house are more picturesque as well. Extensions added to the living-room section rafters create a bellcast eave over the open porch; it reads as a continuation of the gable slope. The rear wall of the main section is very low and, as a result, the roof slope above it seems dramatically elongated. The sweeping expanse of the southwestern slope of the garage roof, which also rises above a low wall, is seen in contrasting relationship to the roof profiles of the house.

Similarly, window design and placement display a greater variety. For example, the northwestern bay of the garage is occupied by a large gabled casement which breaks through the eaves. The casement to its right is set lower in the wall and under the eaves. The three ridge-line dormers are unaligned with any of the openings beneath them. The square attic-level window in the main section gable-wall is off-center; the casement window below lies even further toward the northwest. Openings on the southwestern elevation of the living-room section are constricted by the expanse of the fireplace within. The narrow window on the right side is balanced by the narrowness of the doorway opposite. The hood over this door is carried on relatively simple brackets.

The ridge line of the post-1947 structure which links the garage and house is slightly lower than that of the garage; a single ridge-line dormer is used. Although the design of its southwestern elevation is utilitarian, the long glazed panels which constitute its northeastern elevation and form an enclosed porch make it an addition which is readily differentiated from the original structures. The relative transparency of this elevation evokes the space which originally separated the house from the garage. The northeastern walls of the garage and house are aligned. The symmetrical placement of the main section gable-wall windows -- two in both the principal and attic stories -- is in keeping with the greater formality of this elevation.

## Conclusion

Although it is a small structure, Wallcot's design embodies Flagg's central aesthetic theories. Flagg considered his Todt Hill cottages to be an integral part of his oeuvre, of no less importance, for example, than his most famous design, the Singer Tower, the world's tallest building when completed in 1911. As Flagg recorded in Small Houses, "It may seem to some that the steel frame has little to do with small houses. This may be true of the frame itself but not of the methods of design applicable to it. These methods apply to every artistic construction whether steel frame or otherwise. . . . The idea that it requires one kind of skill to deal successfully with the design of the tall building and another with the small house is fallacious; both alike are architectural problems, and in both alike the immutable laws of right design govern." <sup>11</sup> Many elements contribute to Wallcot's undeniable beauty but primary among them, in Flagg's view, was the modular measure which determined its design and assured a harmonious relationship between all its parts.

The enabling technology exemplified by Wallcot played an influential role in the development of American domestic architecture through the 1920s and 1930s. Flagg's ideas were widely disseminated through his articles in such journals as Country Life and McCall's Magazine. Flagg's methods of economical stone construction and modular design were also taken up and popularized by other architects. Harold Carey's Build a Some--Save a Third, published in 1924, and Frazier Forman Peters' Houses of Stone (1933) brought national attention to Flagg's ideas. <sup>12</sup> Flagg's legacy, however, as represented by Wallcot still endures. By promoting the concept of domestic architecture which is responsive to nature (Flagg's stone cottages have recently been cited as early examples of passive solar design <sup>13</sup>) and respectful of the land, an architecture which did not regard good design and economical construction as mutually exclusive, Flagg articulated goals which retain their validity for contemporary residential design.



NOTES

1. Ernest Flagg, Small Houses: their Economic Design and Construction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Mardges Bacon, Ernest Flagg: Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer (New York: The Architectural History Foundation and Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1986) pp. 270-71.
5. Ibid, p. 48-50. Wallcot is discussed and illustrated as House No. 16. See also photograph No. 32, p. 45.
6. Ibid, p. 96.
7. The precise location of this quarry has not been established.
8. Wallcot was completely stuccoed at some unknown date after Flagg's death in 1947. The stucco has been removed relatively recently; existing mortar may have been applied at the same time. The foliation may be related to the stucco and its removal and is possibly aggravated by the existing mortar which may be too hard for this stone.
9. Flagg, p. 6.
10. Daniel A. Levy, "Bow-Cot and the Honeymoon Cottage: Two Experimental Stone Houses by New York Architect Ernest Flagg," Fine Homebuilding, No. 5 (October/November, 1981), p. 30., cites Flagg's comment regarding asphalt roof shingles and follows: "... simply funny, for vertical slits are cut, apparently for the pleasure of wasting money to repair the damage done, as they make three layers necessary where one would do."
11. Flagg, p. 83.
12. Dr. Mardges Bacon, Testimony Given at the Landmarks Preservation Commission Public Hearing on October 12, 1982, pp. 9-10.
13. Ibid, p. 7.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

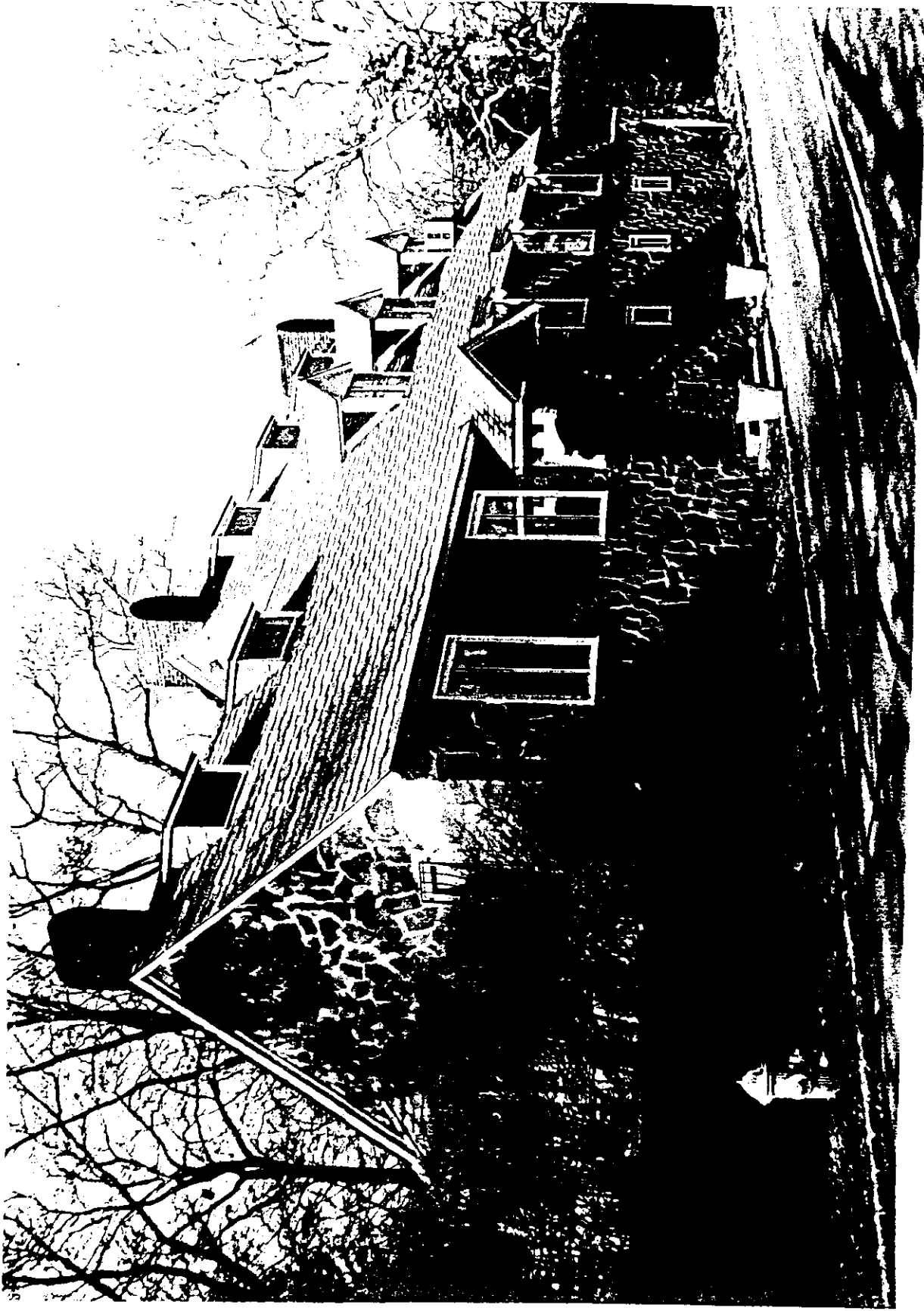
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Wallcot has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Wallcot was one of several innovative stone cottages built by the noted American architect Ernest Flagg on the grounds of his Todt Hill estate; that Wallcot employs the experimental cost-saving design and construction techniques developed by Flagg with the goal of making affordable housing available to a broad segment of the nation's population; that by its use of modular design Wallcot exemplifies Flagg's Beaux-Arts derived aesthetic principles; that Wallcot substantiates Flagg's conviction that economical construction does not preclude good design; that Wallcot's design, one of the more than fifty residential designs included in Flagg's Small Houses, demonstrates that uniformity need not be a product of economical construction; that Wallcot's sensitive siting which respects the existing topography is exemplary; that because it incorporates features responsive to changing climatic conditions, Wallcot represents a pioneering example of passive solar design; and that Wallcot embodies goals which retain their validity for contemporary residential design.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Ernest Flagg's Todt Hill Cottages: Wallcot, 285 Flagg Place, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 89g, Lot 4 Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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- New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. Research Files: Ernest Flagg House, Gatehouse and Gate and Expanded Landmarks Site of the Ernest Flagg House, Gatehouse and Gate.



Built: 1918-1921  
Architect: Ernest Flagg

WALLCOT  
285 Flagg Place  
Staten Island

Photo Credit: Carl Forster  
1987