

**Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth House, 190 Meisner Avenue, Staten Island. Built 1856**

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 2268, Lot 180

On April 10, 2007 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth House, 190 Meisner Avenue, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six speakers including a representative of the owner of the building and representatives for the Preservation League of Staten Island, Historic Districts Council, the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America, and the West Brighton Restoration Society testified in favor of the designation. There were no speakers in opposition to the designation. The Commission has received letters in support of the designation from Council member James S. Oddo, the Municipal Art Society, and the Rego-Forest Preservation Council. (A public hearing had previously been held on this item on September 13, 1966, [LP-0365].)

Summary

The Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth house is significant for its architectural design and for its historical and cultural associations with two important occupants. Picturesquely sited on Lighthouse (Richmond) Hill, this impressive Italianate villa, constructed around 1856 for Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth, is a fine example of the mid-nineteenth villas which once dotted the hillsides of Staten Island and are now becoming increasingly rare. Named for his uncle, the noted explorer of the Pacific Northwest, Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth (1831-1916) was a prominent corporate attorney, state legislator, and civic leader who maintained a law office in this house. According to Staten Island historian Ira K. Morris, Wyeth named this house "Florence Home" in honor of his daughter Annie Florence who died at the age of nine. A rare surviving masonry villa from this



period when the majority of Staten Island houses were constructed of wood, this large two-and-one-half-story house is faced with brick and is trimmed with sandstone. It was among the earliest rural residences in the Italianate style on Staten Island and displays the cubic form, low hipped roof, wide overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, paired chimneys with molded caps, and octagonal cupola or belvedere typical of Italianate designs. The house's relatively narrow trabeated windows have flush stone lintels and projecting stone sills and contain historic paired wood casements. The horizontal attic windows beneath the eaves contain sliding double-lights. In the mid-1920s, the house was acquired by opera star Graham Marr. Marr, who had studied architecture at Columbia University before embarking on his operatic career, was an acclaimed baritone who sang with a number of leading English and American companies and recorded with Columbia Records. Recently the present owner began restoring the paired brackets that had been removed from the house's crowning cornice and installed new wood parapets above the entrance porch and at the captain's walk.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Lighthouse Hill

The Wyeth House is located on Meisner Avenue on the eastern slope of Lighthouse Hill, historically known as Richmond Hill, the southernmost of the chain of serpentine hills that extend through the center of the island from Upper New York Bay. Lighthouse Hill is bounded on the north by Forest Hill Road, on the east by Rockland Avenue, on the south by Richmond Road and on the west by the Latourette Golf Course.<sup>1</sup> An Early Archaic period Native American site, with components dating from 7300 to 9300 years ago, known as the Richmond Hill Site, has been identified on Lighthouse Hill near Old Mill Road, about a mile from the Wyeth House. Early twentieth century archaeologists reported finding evidence of a Woodland period (600 BC to European Contact) Munsee<sup>2</sup> campsite south of Richmond Road between Moore Street and Hitchcock Avenue and “traces of occupation on the north side of what is now Arthur Kill Road.”<sup>3</sup> It seems unlikely that this property was used as a Native American campsite since it is located on a sloping site relatively distant from a fresh water source. Furthermore, it is unlikely to have served as a lookout camp since it is located below the crest of the hill.

About 1671, a mix of Dutch, French, and English farmers began settling in this area of Staten Island. Much of the land on Lighthouse Hill was granted to John Palmer in the 1680s as part of the extensive Iron Hill patent. William Tiller (1691) and James Hubbard (date not established) were also granted smaller patents near Richmond Creek.<sup>4</sup> A hamlet developed at Stony Brook, now Egbertville, near the present-day junction of Amboy Road and Rockland Avenue and became the county seat when Richmond County was established in 1683. Several farms were established but most of the land remained undeveloped. Around 1700 several existing Native American trails in the area were flattened to create simple leveled wagon roads: Arthur Kill Road, called Fresh Kill Road, was opened in 1694; Richmond Hill Road was laid out in 1701; the road to Stony Brook was laid out in 1705; and Old Mill Road was officially laid out in 1709 along the route of an earlier road. Around 1695 the Reformed Dutch community built a combination school, church, and home for a “voorlezer” or lay reader on Arthur Kill Road in the tiny hamlet of Cocclestown,<sup>5</sup> so named for the abundance of oysters harvested in the area. Considered a superior site because of its location at the convergence of roads leading to all parts of the island and at the head of the navigable Fresh Kills, Cocclestown also became the site of St. Andrew’s Church (Episcopal), constructed from 1711 to 1713. In 1711, the county government built a prison there. In 1728 Cocclestown was officially chosen to be the new county seat and was renamed Richmond Town. A new county court house was constructed there that year. In 1729 the old road to Stony Brook was closed and Richmond Road was opened to Egbertville and New Dorp. The intersection of Richmond and Amboy Roads in New Dorp, the juncture of routes leading to New York, Richmond, and Philadelphia, subsequently developed as an important crossroads served by a number of inns including the renowned Rose and Crown and Black Horse Tavern both owned by members of the Vanderbilt family (both demolished). Egbertville developed primarily as a farming community named for the members of the Egbert family who settled principally along Rockland Avenue.

During the Revolutionary War the British constructed earthen redoubts on Lighthouse Hill. Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, commander of the Rangers, had his headquarters in the old Latourette house (demolished). General William Howe made his headquarters at the Rose and Crown in New Dorp in 1776. The British also occupied Richmond Town during the war establishing quarters in many of the village’s buildings. Upon their departure, the British burned the courthouse and other buildings in Richmond Town.

Little development occurred in Richmond Town during the next thirty years; however, a second county courthouse was constructed on Arthur Kill Road in 1793. Richmond Town began to grow again around 1800 and was incorporated as a village in 1823. By 1828 the First County Clerk’s and Surrogate’s Office was constructed to the east of the jail. A hotel, named Richmond County Hall, was built around 1829 and soon became a popular gathering place for political and social events. New Dorp continued to prosper as a major transportation hub and farming community.

Until the 1850s much of Lighthouse Hill remained undeveloped and forested. In 1818, David Moore, the minister of Saint Andrew’s Church, built a Federal-style gambrel-roofed farmhouse at the

base of the hill near Richmond Road that was occupied by members of the Moore family until 1943. Richmond Town's first public (non-parochial) school, located on Lighthouse Hill opposite St. Andrew's, opened about 1830. On the western end of Lighthouse Hill near Richmond Hill Road, David Latourette erected an imposing Greek Revival brick house in 1836 which is now the clubhouse of the Latourette Park Golf Course.<sup>6</sup> At the eastern end of the hill near the present-day intersection of Rockland Avenue and Meisner Avenue, a large frame Greek Revival style building was erected c. 1830 which served for a number of years as a finishing school known as the Richmond Seminary for Young Ladies conducted by J.W. Frazer and A.M and J. P. Kellett.<sup>7</sup> In 1852, schoolmaster Joseph P. Kellet converted the building to a summer resort-boarding house, known as the Richmond Hill Hotel, which remained in operation until around 1870. Following the death of Rev. David Moore in 1856, St. Andrew's Church erected a new parsonage to house his successor on Richmond Road near Wilder Avenue. To the west of the St. Andrew's property, Carl August Meissner and his wife Amelia Fredericke Roebeling Meissner (sister of bridge-builder John Roebling) purchased a large tract (over eighty acres) on Lighthouse Hill soon after they immigrated to this country from Germany in 1848.<sup>8</sup> Meissner cleared a portion of the land for farming and built a house near Richmond Road, just west of an old dirt road leading part-way up the hill. Meissner extended that road through to Rockland Avenue creating a private drive that became present-day Lighthouse Hill Road and Meisner Avenue. Meissner subsequently built a fifteen room Italianate mansion on an elevated plateau on his property which provided views of the ocean and the surrounding countryside.<sup>9</sup> In November 1854, Meissner sold a 1.1-acre-tract extending southward from the drive (Meisner Avenue) immediately to the west of the Kellett property to attorney Nathaniel J. Wyeth. In 1856, Wyeth purchased an additional acre from Meissner and built his handsome Italianate villa on the land.<sup>10</sup> Eventually Nathaniel J. Wyeth and his wife Ann C. Wyeth purchased about six acres from the Meissner and his heirs.

#### Nathaniel J. Wyeth and Ann C. Wyeth<sup>11</sup>

Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth, son of Charles and Elizabeth (Norris) Wyeth, was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1830 where his father and his uncle Leonard were partners in a silk importing firm. Nathaniel J. Wyeth was named for another uncle, his father's brother Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth (1802-1856), an early explorer and trader in the Pacific Northwest who became wealthy through his ice-harvesting business in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and through his inventions which "revolutionized the ice-harvesting business and increased its productivity enormously."<sup>12</sup> The younger Nathaniel J. Wyeth attended the Lawrenceville School and was admitted to Harvard University at the age of sixteen. He received a BA in 1850, then entered Harvard Law and graduated with an LLD in 1852, having taken time to study Dante under the tutelage of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1853, Nathaniel Wyeth began practicing law in New York City. In 1854 he married Ann (Annie) Caroline Frost, the daughter of Susan Ann (Hill) and William Frost, a prominent and successful New Orleans cotton broker and ship owner, who was then living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nathaniel Wyeth's uncle, Leonard J. Wyeth, who had been living in New York City and operating a silk importing firm for some years, began renting a house on Staten Island in 1853 and this may have inspired Nathaniel Wyeth to make his home on the island. The property Nathaniel Wyeth purchased on Lighthouse Hill was convenient to the county court house in Richmond Town and to stages that ran to the ferry landing in Clifton, making commuting to New York City possible.

Wyeth continued to maintain an office in New York City. His clients included oil and mining companies, railroads, and inventors. Wyeth also had an office in this house which he used for his Staten Island practice which included serving as chief counsel for the Staten Island Railroad. According to Leng and Davis, Wyeth "enjoyed a considerable practice," which included "many important cases, most of which were altruistic in their character."<sup>13</sup> He also represented Richmond County in the New York State Assembly from 1867 to 1872. In 1870 "he originated, prepared and passed the Staten Island bridge and harbor improvement bill"<sup>14</sup> which proposed the construction of a bridge from Ellis Island to Robbins Reef and from there to New Brighton. (The scheme was eventually abandoned for lack of capital.).<sup>15</sup> In 1871 he served as chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Inter-communication of the Richmond County Improvement Commission which was appointed by the State Legislature to plan for roads,

avenues, parks, and other improvements on Staten Island as a means of attracting new residents. In 1880 Wyeth mounted a successful legal challenge to an act that would have exempted corporations from local government taxes. He was the Greenback–Labor Party<sup>16</sup> candidate for Richmond County Judge and Surrogate in 1887. The party opposed the shift from paper money back to a specie-based monetary because it believed that a specie-based system gave banks and corporations too much power over the money supply and was detrimental to workers and farmers. It also vigorously opposed black disenfranchisement in the post-Reconstruction South and supported an income tax, eight-hour work day and women’s suffrage. Wyeth ran on an “Anti-monopoly,” “Anti-Corruption” platform.<sup>17</sup> Although Wyeth and his wife’s family money come from Southern business, Wyeth does not appear to have strong Southern sympathies.

“A most delightful conversationalist,” who made “fidelity to friends ... a prominent part of his religion,”<sup>18</sup> Wyeth was of a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his brother Judge William Emerson, of [Commodore] Cornelius Vanderbilt and his son William H. Vanderbilt, both of whom he represented in regard to the Staten Island Railroad, of Governors Horatio Seymour, John T. Hoffman, and John Adams Dix, and of many of Staten Island’s most prominent attorneys, clergymen, and physicians. Many of his friends and his Staten Island clients visited this house which Wyeth named “Florence Home” in honor of his eldest daughter Annie Florence (b. 1855) who died when she was only nine. Described by Staten Island historian Ira K. Morris, a longtime friend, as “plain and substantial,” the house was renowned for its hillside siting “overlooking the wide sweep of beautiful landscape and ocean view that stretches out for miles away.”<sup>19</sup> Within, according to Morris, it was the “acme of intelligence and refinement.”<sup>20</sup> Especially noteworthy was Wyeth’s home office, “a rare and wonderful nook.”<sup>21</sup>

*Books, embracing various subjects aside from the law, are there in great numbers. Portraits of men—Emerson, Lincoln, Grant, Seward, Washington, Tilden, Hancock, McClellan, Scott and a score of other soldiers and statesmen—adorn the little spots of wall space which the books reluctantly surrender. Easy chairs, some of the owner’s invention; nameless and numberless relics, gathered by friends from the world’s nooks and corners.*<sup>22</sup>

The Wyeths occupied the house with their four children Annie Florence (1855-64), Charles Nathaniel (1858-1922), Helen Elizabeth (Nellie, 1865-?), and Lucille (1867-?). In 1860, their household also included a live-in Irish-immigrant cook, Bridget Burns, and eighteen-year old Emma Frost, presumably a young relative of Ann C. Wyeth. Their son, Charles Wyeth, studied Civil Engineering at the Columbia College School of Mines.<sup>23</sup> He was involved in the location and construction of the Staten Island and North and South Shore railroads and the Crystal Water Supply Company works on Staten Island in the 1880s; he then moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where he was involved in the construction projects for Wyoming Valley Railroad and the Susquehanna and Alleghany Railroad. By 1893 he had returned to New York and was appointed assistant engineer to the New York State Fisheries Commission. He subsequently was employed by the New York City Hydrographic Department. Charles married Mary Ruth Adney, sister of the noted photographer and artist [Edwin] Tappan Adney, in 1900 and they had two sons, Charles Nathaniel Adney Wyeth, known as Adney (1903-?), and George Hamilton (1905-?). Lucille Wyeth remained at home and helped care for her aging parents. The Wyeth’s other daughter, Helen (Nellie), left home to study art in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she ultimately settled, residing in a house on Massachusetts Avenue with her mother’s sister and brother. Ann C. Wyeth died at age 85 in 1914, Nathaniel J. Wyeth died at home at age 86 in March 1916. In July 1916, Charles Wyeth was admitted to the State Hospital on Ward’s Island.<sup>24</sup> He died there in 1922. His sister Lucille joined her sister in Cambridge.<sup>25</sup> Adney Wyeth went to sea at the age of 16, serving as a radio operator on a number of vessels between 1919 and 1921.<sup>26</sup> By 1925 he and his mother Mary Ruth Wyeth were living together in Mount Vernon, New York.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1930s, Adney Wyeth, who had become an engineer, his wife Gwyneth, and his mother were residing in Windsor, Connecticut.<sup>28</sup> This house stood empty for some years.

### The Design of the Wyeth House<sup>29</sup>

In his biographical sketch of Nathaniel J. Wyeth, Ira K. Morris indicated that this house was “planned and erected” by Wyeth in 1856,<sup>30</sup> although it seems likely that both a masonry contractor and house carpenters were employed for so substantial and ornate a house. This large two-and-one-half-story house, faced with brick and trimmed with sandstone, is an unusual extant masonry Italianate villa from a period when the majority of Staten Island houses were constructed of wood and is among the earliest surviving rural residences in the Italianate style on Staten Island.

In the mid-nineteenth Staten Island’s hillsides were dotted with villas – suburban houses designed in the fashionable styles of the day built for well-to-do businessmen and professionals who wished “to enjoy the scenery of the country, without removing too far from active life.”<sup>31</sup> Many of these villas were built as part of small suburban enclaves developed by wealthy investors such as Elliottville, developed by Dr. Samuel MacKenzie Elliott in the 1840s and 1850s, of which the Greek Revival villa at 60 Delafield Place (possibly Calvin Pollard, c. 1850, a designated New York City Landmark) is a notable survivor, or Hamilton Park, originally Brighton Park, laid out around 1851-52 by Charles K. Hamilton, of which 105 Franklin Avenue (Carl Pfeiffer, c. 1864, a designated New York City Landmark) and 66 Harvard Avenue (c. 1853, a designated New York City Landmark) are notable survivors. Others like the Wyeth House, or the now demolished Carl August Meissner (later Frederick Meissner House, c. 1860) on Lighthouse Hill or the David R. Ryers House (later Gustave A. Mayer House, c. 1855-56, a designated New York City Landmark) at 2475 Richmond Road in nearby New Dorp were built by individual owners for their personal use.

Typically during this period villas were sited in relation to the surrounding landscape following English principals of planning and design that emphasized seclusion and privacy and the enjoyment of “Picturesque” vistas.<sup>32</sup> These ideas had been popularized in America through a number of nationally-circulated journals and architectural handbooks, notably the publications of landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, whose works included essays in *The Horticulturalist*, the influential “journal of rural art and rural taste,” which he edited until his death in 1852, and several architectural handbooks, including *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841), *Cottage Residences* (1842), and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850).<sup>33</sup> The Wyeth House reflects English ideas in its siting. Set in a terraced woodland knoll a little distance from the road and below street grade, the house is secluded in the landscape and only partially visible to passersby. The house is oriented so that a side wall faces the road and the main entrance on the west side of the house is partially screened from view heightening the sense of privacy. The main entrance is marked by a small porch; in contrast full-length porches (south porch replaced by an open terrace, east porch no longer extant) extended along the south and east sides of the house which looked down on to the sloping landscape of Lighthouse Hill and Richmondtown and the bay in the distance. The belvedere provided views of the bay and “commanded a full view of the ocean.”<sup>34</sup> The siting also allowed an expanse of lawn on the terraced area to the west of the house which permitted the inclusion of a circular driveway, carriage house, and a garden that could be viewed from the dining room and front parlor.

The Italianate Style “traces its origins to the evocative rural buildings” depicted in the landscape paintings of the seventeenth-century masters Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin.<sup>35</sup> Interest in the style was also promoted by a number of young architects who began making drawings of vernacular and Renaissance buildings in conjunction with their studies in Italy at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> The style was developed in England by John Nash whose Cronkhill in Shropshire (1802) is considered to be the first Italianate villa. After designs for Italianate villas appeared in a number of English pattern books, the style was introduced to the United States in the late 1830s and was popularized by Downing’s pattern books as an alternative to the Gothic, favored for its picturesque beauty, expression of comfortable home life, and cultural associations. 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 asymmetrically-massed blocks juxtaposed with a prominent tower; however, Italianate buildings were often symmetrically arranged cubic masses with low-pitched roofs, projecting eaves, large decorative brackets, and porches. One of the most famous pattern books of the period, Samuel Sloan’s *The Model Architect* of 1852 was the first American pattern book to present designs for squarish Italian

villas with central roof cupolas (belvederes), a building type ultimately derived from the casino at Villa Lante, Bagnaia (attr. Giacomo Vignola, 1578-89).

The design of the Wyeth House relates to one of Sloan's more elaborate versions of this building type, his Southern Mansion (Volume 2, Design XLIV). Like Sloan's Southern Mansion, the Wyeth House is a five-bay-wide, two-and-one-half-story squarish brick villa with attic windows set between paired brackets beneath widely projecting eaves capped by a hipped roof with paired chimneys and a belvedere. Like Sloan's design the Wyeth House also has floor-length first story windows equipped with French doors to provide access to the verandas. Historic photographs show that the windows at the Wyeth House like the windows in Sloan's design originally had louvered shutters. Although the Wyeth House is less richly ornamented than Sloan's elaborate design, it does incorporate some features not found in its prototype, notably the complex octagonal-shape belvedere that lights the house's grand oval stairwell.

Interestingly, the Wyeth House shares a number of features with the Gustave A. Mayer (originally David A. Ryers) House, in nearby New Dorp, constructed c. 1855-56. That house also takes its overall design from Sloan's Southern Mansion, although the Mayer House is frame and has elaborate window surrounds which may have been adapted from other Italianate designs in the Sloan pattern book. Two other Staten Island Italianate cubical form houses have cupolas: the Captain John T. Barker House, 9-11 Trinity Place (1851) and the much altered house at 19 Faber Street. There are also a number of two-and-one-half-story, cubical-form, Italianate villas with overhanging bracketed eaves that do not have belvederes. These include the Dr. James R. Boardman House at 710 Bay Street (c. 1848, a designated New York City Landmark), the 2876 Richmond Terrace House (c. 1853, aka Stephen D. Barnes House, a designated New York City Landmark), the W.C. Anderson House, 292 Van Duzer Street (pre-1853), the 364 St. Paul's Avenue House (c. 1856-59, within the St. Paul's Avenue-Stapleton Heights Historic District), the 356 St. Paul's Avenue House (c. 1860-61, within the St. Paul's Avenue-Stapleton Heights Historic District), the Anton G. Methfessel House, 360 Van Duzer Street (c. 1862), and the 105 Franklin Avenue House c. 1864, aka Hamilton Park Cottage). It is worth noting that of these houses only the 2876 Richmond Terrace House and the 105 Franklin Avenue House are brick, speaking to the relative paucity of masonry villas from this period when the majority of Staten Island houses were constructed of wood. Today, the Wyeth House is distinguished by its masonry construction, as an early example of the cubical-form Italianate villa on Staten Island, and as one of only four known extant examples on the island incorporating a central rooftop belvedere.

#### Graham Marr and Norman R. Morrison

In 1925 Helen and Lucille Wyeth conveyed their interest in this property to Mary Ruth Wyeth who sold the property to Staten Island businessman John M. Stickel. Stickel had the property surveyed and almost immediately sold this house and one-acre of land, known as "the Homestead Tract of Nathaniel J. Wyeth" to opera singer Graham Marr, subject to a restrictive covenant stipulating that Marr would use the building solely as a dwelling until January 1935.<sup>37</sup>

Marr had born in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, in 1877 and attended Princeton University (Class of 1901) where he had been a member of the university glee club.<sup>38</sup> He subsequently enrolled in the architecture program at Columbia University and began taking voice lessons with the intent of becoming a church and concert singer. In the summer of 1907 he scored a major success as the soloist in a series of concerts given by the Franz Kaltenborn Orchestra. To gain stage experience Marr sought work in vaudeville and in 1908 landed a leading part in a musical comedy sketch titled *The Naked Truth*. The show toured the United States then traveled to England in 1909, opening at the London Coliseum. Marr's voice brought him to the attention of Charles Manners, one of the proprietors of the Moody-Manners Grand Opera Company, who entered into a three-year contract with Marr and began training him in the major grand opera baritone roles. After leaving the Moody-Manners Company, Marr continued his operatic studies in Paris and then entered into a contract with the Quinlan Opera Company. He toured Great Britain, Africa, Australia, and Canada with the Quinlan Company and won acclaim as "the best Elijah of our time."<sup>39</sup> With the outbreak of World War I he returned to the United States where he was engaged by the Century Opera Company and made his debut at the Century Opera House in New York in

the title role of *William Tell* in September 1914. After singing with the Century Company for two years he appeared as a leading baritone with the Chicago and Boston operas. He toured extensively with the Boston-National Grand Opera Company, appearing in more than fifty cities and covering a territory of 12,000 miles. In 1916, his success in the role Zurga in *Pecheurs De Perles* led Columbia Records to offer him a contract and in 1917 he and tenor James Harrod made the first recording of the duet *Au fond du temple saint*. In their publicity Columbia billed Marr as “America’s foremost operatic baritone.”<sup>40</sup> From 1918 to 1922 he sang with the summer opera in Ravinia Park in Chicago. In 1921 he began appearing with Fortune Gallo’s San Carlo Opera Company, an enormously successful touring company which made an extended stay each year in New York. In 1926 he appeared with Japanese soprano Tamaki Miura and Manhattan Opera Company in San Francisco in the opera *Namiko-San* which had been composed by Alberto Franchetti for them.

Marr toured with Tamaki Miura and appeared on radio broadcasts during the late 1920s but his career was drawing to a close when he purchased the Wyeth House in 1925. According to an interview published in the *Staten Island Advance* in 1929, “after a life of operatic tours he was looking for a place to settle down.”<sup>41</sup> He and landscape painter Norman Robert Morrison installed electricity and telephone service, modern plumbing, and rebuilt the captain’s walk around the belvedere. They also converted the former dining room to a drawing room/amateur theater, adding landscape murals of Staten Island scenes, which the *Advance* attributed to Marr, indicating that he was an amateur painter. They furnished the house with odd pieces of furniture gathered from different sections of the island “out of love for styles no longer current.”<sup>42</sup> The house was renamed “Marr Lodge” and in later years Morrison turned his love of antiques into a business.<sup>43</sup> Marr died sometime after 1948. Morrison lived on in the house devoting much of his time to the gardens where he planted 12,000 bulbs in the spring of 1955.<sup>44</sup> He died in 1968 at the age of 76.<sup>45</sup> He had been in failing health for some time and he left the house and land to two neighbors who had assisted with his care and who had promised to care for his numerous pets. After a lengthy dispute the executor of the estate, Vito Lettieri, took title to the property in 1970.<sup>46</sup>

The house stood vacant for some years with Letteri making some alterations, including removing the roof brackets. It was acquired by the present owner, Robert R. Wakeham in 1978.<sup>47</sup> Wakeham and his partner Thomas E. Sweeney began extensive renovations of the interior and exterior of the house. The work included constructing a new balustraded terrace in place of the south porch, adding second story balconies on the east façade, and rebuilding the captain’s walk. Currently there is an ongoing effort to replace the paired brackets beneath the overhanging eaves.

### Description

**Grounds:** The Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth House is located near the crest of Lighthouse Hill on the south side of Meisner Avenue. Its trapezoidal lot has a curving frontage of about 156 feet along Meisner Avenue and is about 207 feet deep along its eastern boundary and 225 feet deep along its western boundary. The house is set back somewhat from the street and is located near the northeast corner of the lot. The land has been terraced around the house, especially on the west where there is a circular driveway and on the south where there is a terraced lawn in front of the basement level addition. Beyond the terraced areas the ground slopes sharply downward and is thickly wooded.

Along Meisner Avenue the property is bordered by a non-historic curb of wood rails. The principal access to the house is via a driveway which extends from the street, circles in front of the house, and provides access to the garage along the western property line. The portion of the driveway nearest the street is covered with asphalt the remainder is dirt and gravel. (The presence of a circular drive in front of the house is historic, the paving materials are not.) A short L-shaped brick and pebble path extends from the drive to the street. The path is flanked by non-historic wood posts with chains. Two non-historic mailboxes are attached to the posts. A non-historic path with similar paving materials and posts extends from the street to the rear yard to the east side of the house.

The rusticated cement-block garage at the western edge of the property probably was constructed in the early twentieth century. It has a mansard roof which has recently been re-clad with non-historic shingles. The three historic lampposts with replacement globes that light the driveway were moved to this property from another Staten Island property after 1978. The historic cast-iron urns which flank the



entrance to the house, the cast iron benches, statuary, birdbaths, gnomes, etc, scattered about the yard are not permanently affixed and therefore not subject to this designation.

**House:** The Wyeth House is a two-and-one-half-story cubical form brick and brownstone Italianate villa capped by a hipped roof with four brick chimneys and a central octagonal belvedere. The house has a columned entrance porch with hipped roof on the primary (western) façade which is historic although perhaps not original. The original one-story hipped roofed porch on the south side of the house has been replaced by a non-historic balustraded veranda which rests on a basement extension incorporating the old foundation walls of the old porch. The original one-story wood porch topped by a balcony on the eastern façade has also been removed. Basement areaways which originally formed a U extending about halfway along the north and south sides of the house and the entire east wall have been filled in. Above a brownstone base, the facades are constructed of brick laid in common bond. Historic photographs suggest that the walls were painted a light color or perhaps initially stuccoed. (During various periods in the house's history portions of the wall surface were concealed by vines.) The windows are set off by projecting brownstone sills and flush lintels. Most of the windows retain their original paired wood casement sash. The attic windows have paired sashes which slide into the recessed pockets in the walls. A number of the windows also retain historic wood storm windows. The hardware for the house's original louvered shutters survives but the shutters have been removed. The house is capped by a hipped roof with deep overhanging eaves which were originally supported by paired wood brackets. In recent years the roof was reshingled and a new gutter system, which currently drains on to the west lawn, was installed. Recently, the brackets were replaced on the western façade. (At the time of designation this work was ongoing with the intention of replacing all the brackets.) In 2006-07 the captain's walk around the belvedere was rebuilt, replacing a 1920s captain's walk, which, in turn, replaced the original balcony seen in a 1907 photo of the house. The design of the railing used for the captain's walk and for the railing above the entrance porch (also installed in 2006-07) was inspired by the design of the wood porches that used to extend along the north and south sides of the house as seen in 1920s photos of the house.

The house's **primary façade** facing westward to the carriage drive has a five-bay design. The entry at center of first-story is marked by a semi-enclosed hipped-roofed one-story porch fronted by square wood columns with acanthus leaf capitals and pilaster responds facing the front of the enclosed portion of the porch. The pilasters and columns carry a simple wood frieze and cornice which support the porches hipped roof. The porch is approached by a non-historic concrete slab and a non-historic brown concrete step which extends in front of or replaces the front portion of the porch floor. Historic brownstone survives at the sides of the porch supporting the column bases. The center portion of the stone is laid with flagstone. The porch columns support non-historic flag brackets for flags and are ornamented with small non-historic brass plaques in the shape of lighthouses inscribed with the number "190." The paired paneled wood doors appear to be original to the house and retain their historic hardware. The porch ceiling retains its historic wood lath ceiling. The globe light suspended from the ceiling of the porch is a historic fixture but was taken from another building and installed here after 1978. A security camera is also mounted on the porch ceiling. The porch roof has non-historic shingles and is now screened from view by a wood railing installed c. 2006. The railing also conceals portions of a wood beam that extends behind the peak of the roof. The presence of this beam suggests that the current porch replaced an earlier somewhat lower flat-roofed porch; however, the present porch would be a relatively early replacement since it is shown in the 1907 photo.

The western façade has two basement windows which are lit by lightwells submerged in the lawn. The wells are protected by non-historic metal grates and the windows have non-historic replacement sashes. The first story windows have historic paired wood four-light casements. During the winter months these are protected by historic eight-light wood storms. The shorter second-story windows have historic paired wood three-light casements and are protected by historic wood storm windows with two vertical lights. The center second-story window was sealed when the present owner acquired the house and has replacement sash. The attic windows retain their original two-light sliding sash.

The **north façade** which faces Meisner Avenue is articulated into three bays. The brownstone base is not visible on this façade. A historic stone plaque ornamented with a shell motif and fitted with a



non-historic spigot has been set into the brick wall between the western and center window bays at the base of the wall. There is also a more recent non-historic spigot located closer to the center window. The first-story windows have historic four-light wood casements and the second-story windows have historic three-light wood casements. The first story west and center windows have historic eight-light wood storms; the east first-story window is protected by a non-historic tripartite screen. The second-story storm windows are non-historic. The single attic window at the center of the façade retains its historic two-light wood sliding window. A non-historic metal box for mechanical equipment has been installed at the attic level just to the west of the center attic window.

The **south façade** is articulated into four bays with the two middle windows set close to each other at the center of the façade and the east and north windows near the corners of the façade. All of the first story window openings contain historic paired wood four-light French doors topped by historic two-light wood transoms. These are protected by non-historic single-leaf storm doors and single-pane storm windows. The second story windows retain their historic paired triple-light casement windows and also have non-historic storm windows. The attic windows located at the center of the façade retain their historic double-light sliding wood windows. Two non-historic copper lanterns have been installed on the piers between the outer and inner bays at the first story.

Extending out from this façade is a non-historic veranda with cast-stone balustrades that rests on the roof of the basement extension on the south side of the house. A non-historic exterior wood stair leads down from the veranda to terraced lawn below. The walls of this extension are the foundations of the old porch refaced with stucco and with a new central entrance door flanked by a pair of picture windows.

The **east (rear) façade** of the house is arranged into five bays. Originally, this façade was fronted by a wood porch which extended across most of the façade at the first story and formed a balcony at the second story. A non-historic patio with clay tile and pebble flooring and non-historic wood lattice fencing and an iron gate replaces the porch at the first story. The house is accessed by a central entrance which opens onto the rear hall. There are two windows on the south side of the façade; the north side of the façade which faces onto the back stair is windowless. The window openings at the first story contain historic paired four-light wood casements which are protected by historic eight-light wood storm windows. The entry retains its original triple light transom; the historic wood and glass door probably dates from the 1890s or early twentieth century. At the second story the five windows are evenly spaced but the second and fourth windows (reading south to north) are longer than the other openings and are fronted by non-historic iron balconies that incorporate sections of mid-nineteenth-century railings. The two long windows have historic paired four-light casement windows protected by non-historic storm windows. The three smaller windows have non-historic paired casements. The two attic windows, located at the second and fourth bays, retain their historic two-light sliding sash. The north window has a historic wood casement storm window. Several sculptural fragments, a historic torchere, a bracket for a flag, and a Staten Island ferry sign have been affixed to this wall post-1978.

The hipped **roof** of the house has wide eaves which were sheathed with non-historic materials in the 1970s when the box cornice and brackets were removed. The roof is clad with non-historic shingles. The brick chimneys also retain their original form. The belvedere retains its original octagonal form. Its walls have been sheathed with non-historic shingles. Most of the windows contain non-historic eight-light wood fixed sash fabricated to match the lantern's historic windows. Non-historic sliding glass doors have been inserted on the east and west sides of the belvedere and most of the fixed lights have non-historic storm windows. The belvedere cornices were also replaced or encased by non-historic materials in 2006-07 but the original brackets survive.

Report researched and written by  
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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Harlow McMillan, "Lighthouse Hill," *Encyclopedia of New York*, ed. Kenneth Jackson (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1995), 676.
- <sup>2</sup> The Munsee were Algonquin-speaking Lenape (also known as the Delaware) who occupied Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and southern New York.
- <sup>3</sup> This information on the Native American presence in the vicinity of Lighthouse Hill is based on Cultural Resource Group, "Phase 1B Archaeological Investigation Richmond Creek Sewer Project, Capital Project No. SE-733/735/WM-1/EP-7," prepared for Cruz Construction Company, December, 1997; Greenhouse Consultants Inc., "Archaeological and Historical Sensitivity Evaluation Seaview Hospital, Northern Parcel, Staten Island, New York," prepared for Buckhurst, Fish & Jaquemart, Inc. 2002
- <sup>4</sup> *Map of Staten Island Richmond County, New York, Colonial Land Patents from 1668 to 1712*, prepared under the direction of Frederick Skene, 1907
- <sup>5</sup> The Voorlezer's House is a designated New York City Landmark.
- <sup>6</sup> Both the David Latourette House and Rev. David Moore House are designated New York City Landmarks.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People: A History, 1609-1929* (New York Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1930), v. 1, p. 515; Margaret Lundrigan Ferrer, *Richmond Town and Lighthouse Hill* (Dover , New Hampshire: Arcadia Publishing, 1996), 118; "Boarding," *New York Times*, May 31, 1852, p. 3; "Summer Retreats," *New York Times*, July 14, 1855, p. 5; United States Census, 1850, New York State, Richmond County, Northfield.
- <sup>8</sup> "William Meisner," Portrait and Biographical Records of Jasper, Marshall and Grundy Counties, Iowa (Chicago: Biographical Pub. Co, 1894); Obituary, Amalie Friedericke Meissner, *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1868, p. 5.
- <sup>9</sup> "Real Estate at Auction," *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1870, p. 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 35, p. 316; Liber 37, p. 431, p. 728, Liber 505, 554.
- <sup>11</sup> This biographical section on Nathaniel J. Wyeth is based on Leng and Davis, v. 2, pp. 554, 977; William S. Pelletreau, *Historic Homes and Institutions and Genealogical and Family History of New York* (New York & Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1907), v. 2, pp. 160-162; Ira K. Morris, "N.J. Wyeth's 85 Years," *Staten Islander*, Sept. 11, 1915; *Prominent Men of Staten Island* (New York: AY Hubbell, 1893), 143-145; "Obituary Notes," *New York Times*, Mar. 23, 1916, p.11; United States Census, 1860, Richmond County, Northfield, roll 850, p. 385; United States Census, 1880, Richmond County, Northfield, p. 279; United States Census, 1910, Richmond County, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, ED, 43, p. 3A.
- <sup>12</sup> "Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel\\_Jarvis\\_Wyeth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Jarvis_Wyeth). See also "Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth," *Dictionary of American Biography*.
- <sup>13</sup> Leng & Davis, v. 2, p. 554.
- <sup>14</sup> *Prominent Men*, 144.
- <sup>15</sup> For this project see Herbert B. Reed, "The Planning & Building of Staten Island's Bridges," *Staten Island Historian*, v. 26, no. 102 (Apr-June 1965), 10.
- <sup>16</sup> See "United States Greenback Party," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_Greenback\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Greenback_Party); Mark Lause, "Derailing Third Parties," *Synthesis/Regeneration* 36 (Winter 2005), <http://www.greens.org/s-r/36/36-20.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Campaign flyer, Staten Island Institute of Arts & Sciences Archives, Nathaniel J. Wyeth Papers, folder 1.3.
- <sup>18</sup> Morris.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> This information on Charles N. Wyeth is based on Pelletreau, p. 162, and *Prominent Men of Staten Island*, p. 103, Jim Wheaton, posting re Charles and Mary Ruth Adney at <http://achiver.rootsweb.com/th/read/WYETH/2001-07/0994963733> ; Edwin Tappan Adney, "Adney Genealogy," edited and posted by James W. Wheaton, [www.siterific.com/adneygenealogy](http://www.siterific.com/adneygenealogy); Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA, "Edwin Tappan Adney Papers: Biographical Sketch," <http://www.mariner.org/library/collections/adney.php>.
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Wyeth, Death Certificate, 14807-1922; United States Census, 1920, New York State, Manhattan, ED 1305, p. 16B.
- <sup>25</sup> United States Census, 1910, Massachusetts, Middlesex Co., Cambridge, ED 782, p. 10B; United States Census, 1920, Massachusetts, Middlesex Co., Cambridge, ED 92, p. 15B; United States Census, 1930, Massachusetts, Middlesex Co., Cambridge, ED 68, p. 31B.

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<sup>26</sup> Ancestry.Com, Passenger Lists, s.v. “Adney Wyeth.”

<sup>27</sup> Liber Deeds, Liber 616, p. 356. United States Census, 1930, New York State, Mt. Vernon, ED 60-216, 146; Mount Vernon Directories, 1925, 1927, 1930, 1931.

<sup>28</sup> Greater Hartford Directory, 1939, p. 1115.

<sup>29</sup> Portions of this section on the design of the Wyeth House were adapted from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Gustave Meyer House Designation Report*, prepared by David Breiner (LP-1652) (New York: City of New York, 1989), 2-4. It also draws on the discussion of the impact of British theory and design on American architecture in W. Barksdale Maynard, *Architecture in the United States: 1800-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Daniel D. Reiff, *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2000), Sally Ann McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Dell Upton, “Pattern Books and Professionalism: Aspects of the Transformation of Domestic Architecture in America, 1800-1860, *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 n 2/3 (Summer/Autumn, 1984), 128-150.

<sup>30</sup> Morris.

<sup>31</sup> Humphrey Repton, 1816, quoted in Maynard, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> The term “Picturesque” was coined by British philosophers in the eighteenth century to describe the qualities they admired in the landscape paintings of Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin that they thought were worthy of emulation in landscape design and architecture chiefly naturalness, ruggedness, humility, variety, irregularity, and asymmetry.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of Downing’s career and achievements see George B. Tatum, “A.J. Downing,” in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York: Free Press, 1982). For the impact of his ideas on rural design see McMurry, 39-47.

<sup>34</sup> Pelletreau, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> Reiff, 70.

<sup>36</sup> See Reiff, p. 70 on the English origins of the Italianate style. For the concurrent Continental interest in Italian vernacular and Renaissance buildings see Barry Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: An Architecture for Prussia* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 20-23; Christopher Mead, *Charles Garnier’s Paris Opera* (New York: Architectural Heritage Foundation and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 223-29.

<sup>37</sup> Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 599, p. 522; Liber 601, pp. 195, 196, Liber 616, p. 356.

<sup>38</sup> This section of Graham Marr is based on the Graham Marr Clippings File, Music Division, Performing Arts Library, NYPL; KJ Kutsch and Leo Riemans, *Grosses Sänger-lexikon* (Munich: K.G Saur, 2003), band 4, s.v. Marr, Graham; “Bright New Headliner,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1908, p. 9; Chicago Opens Opera to Brilliant Audience,” *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1915, p. 14; “Grand Opera for Middle West Cities,” *New York Times*, Sept. 9, 1916, p. 9; Caruso Comes Oct. 27: Ravinia Stops,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sep. 3, 1918, p. 15; “San Carlo Company Sings Faust,” *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1921, p. 30; “Music,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1922, p. 82; “Opera Now in Season in September,” *New York Times*, Sept. 2, 1923, sec. x, p. 6; United States Census, 1880, Pennsylvania Northumberland County, Shamokin, 1<sup>st</sup> Ward, p. 95B; United States Census, 1930, New York, Richmond County, ED 134, roll 1615, p. 2A.

<sup>39</sup> “Graham Marr’s Operatic Success, *Musical America*, clipping dated Oct 28, 1915 in the Graham Marr Clippings File.

<sup>40</sup> Columbia Records Ad , c. 1916, in the Graham Marr Clippings File.

<sup>41</sup> “Island Operatic Star Restores Historic Wyeth House,” *Staten Island Advance*, May 18, 1929.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The Commission is grateful to owner Robert Wakeman for sharing his knowledge of the later history of the house and making available a number of photographs found in the attic. He has provided the commission with a photocopy of the sign for Morrison’s antiques business at “Marr Lodge.”

<sup>44</sup> Dorothy H. Jenkins, “Around the Garden,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1955, p. x23.

<sup>45</sup> Richmond County, Office of the Surrogate, Estate of Norman R. Morrison, Probate file 407-1968. In 1969 a newspaper article noted that a couple had spent the day picnicking at the “deserted ivy-covered mansion,” surrounded by pine trees and rhododendron bushes. “Cars, Crocuses Crowd S.I.” *New York Times*, Apr 10, 1969, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Deeds Liber 1924, p. 170.

<sup>47</sup> Deeds Liber 2231, p. 431.

## 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 Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth 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 Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth House, constructed in 1856, is significant for its architectural design and for its historical and cultural associations with two important occupants; that it is an early and fine example of the cubical form Italianate villa and is one of only four known extant examples of that building type with a central rooftop belvedere on Staten Island; that faced with brick trimmed with sandstone this house is a rare surviving masonry villa from a period when the majority of Staten Island houses were constructed of wood; that the symmetrically-ordered two-and-one-half-story house displays the cubic form, low hipped roof, wide overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, paired chimneys and belvedere typical of Italianate houses of its type; that the house is located on Lighthouse Hill overlooking Richmond Town and is carefully sited in accordance with English theories of the Picturesque; that the house's first owner Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth was a prominent corporate attorney, state legislator, and civic leader; that a later owner, Graham Marr was an acclaimed opera star who sang with a number of leading English and American companies and recorded with Columbia Records; and that the house is a fine example of the mid-nineteenth villas which once dotted the hillsides of Staten Island and are now becoming increasingly rare.

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 Nathaniel J. and Ann C. Wyeth House, 190 Meisner Avenue, Borough of Staten Island and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 2268, Lot 180, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair; Pablo Vengoechea, Vice Chair;  
Stephen Byrnes, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore,  
Richard Olcott, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners