

Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 13, 1970, Number 2
LP-0345

HOUSMAN HOUSE, 308 St. John Avenue, Westerleigh, Borough of Richmond.
Built circa 1730 and circa 1760.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 439, Lot 45.

On May 26, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Housman House 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. The owner of the house has informed the Commission that he favors its designation as a Landmark. The Chairman of Staten Island Community Board No. 1 has also notified the Commission that his Board favors the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Housman House is of value today as it represents two stages in the design and construction of an 18th century Dutch farmhouse. It is one of a small number of houses on Staten Island that antedate the American Revolution.

A small one-room stone house was built about 1730 on the Dongan manor "Castleton", and a larger clapboard addition was made by Peter Housman, a prosperous millwright, after he had purchased forty-six acres of the manor in 1760 from Thomas Dongan. Dongan was the "eldest son and Heir at law of Walter Dongan," (nephew of Thomas Dongan, Governor of New York) "in the 34th year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord George II."

The house stands on the old Watchogue Road. The name Watchogue is a contraction of "Watch Oak" not, as it might seem, an Indian name. In the 18th century, this road was the link between the ferries at the Watering Place (now Tompkinsville) on the Narrows and New Blazing Star (now Rossville) on the Arthur Kill. This was part of the stagecoach route from New York to Philadelphia.

Photographs in the files of the Staten Island Historical Society, taken before 1899, show the building much as it must have originally appeared before certain minor 20th century changes were made. As seen in these photographs, the gable of the older one-and-a-half story, two-bay stone section was originally covered with wood shingles.

The most interesting features of the older part of the house are the unusually deep overhang of its steeply pitched roof, and the front door built up of heavy planks.

The larger three-bay part of the house, built at a later date, is also one-and-a-half stories high but is taller than the small older portion. It has a clapboard front, with two windows and a door in its long dimension. The roof which is not quite as steep as that of the stone section, is broken by two dormer windows. Both sections of the roof are covered with shingles and wood siding has replaced shingles at the gable ends. Six-over-six paned window sash replaces the original smaller paned eighteenth century sash.

The four paneled front door, a good example of Greek Revival design, is now the entrance to the larger section. It has broad rails and stiles and is flanked by sidelights and pilasters ornamented with the Greek key motif. A rustic porch, built of logs, shelters this doorway and runs the width of the end of the house. The paneled shutters are 20th century replacements.

A dramatic event, associated with this house, was the murder of Peter Housman in 1784, when he resisted an attempted robbery by a party of Jersey raiders. According to Housman's will, his oldest son, John received five pounds and his choice of silver watches in addition to his share of the estate, which was divided among the eleven children. Subsequently, John Housman bought the farm from the executors of his father's estate and made it his home. He served the County of Richmond in many official capacities - County Supervisor, Assemblyman, Surrogate, and Judge of the Court of Common Pleas. However, when he died in 1825, his "goods and chattels" were not sufficient to cover claims against his estate. As a result, in the spring of 1826, the administrators advertised the real property as follows:

HOUSMAN HOUSE

"...an excellent farm, consisting of 59 acres of land, with a good dwelling house, barn and other buildings, a good orchard, a sufficient quantity of woodland, and a never failing stream of water running at the rear of the house, with a good well in front; would make a very good stand for a tanyard--situate in Castleton aforesaid; bounded southerly by the main road leading from New Blazing Star ferry to the Baptist meeting house in the Clove...being within one and a half miles of two steamboat wharves plying to New York every day." It was sold at auction to John Baker.

After passing through Vanderbilt-Vreeland ownership, the house and twenty-five acres were sold, in 1887, to be laid out in small lots as a summer resort, known as "Prohibition Park", for members of the temperance movement. Streets were named for its leaders: St. John, a former governor of Kansas, gave his name to the present address of the house. The Housman farm thus evolved into the pleasant residential neighborhood now known as Westerleigh. Fortunately, three lots had been set aside for the Housman House, so that today, well maintained, it is still set on ample landscaped grounds.

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 the Housman House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Housman House is one of the few remaining 18th century Dutch farmhouses in New York City, that it combines stone and frame construction and detail of different periods of architectural development, that it was the home of several representative Staten Island families and that it is a picturesque feature of its neighborhood.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 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 the Housman House, 308 St. John Avenue, Westerleigh, Borough of Richmond and designates Tax Map Block 439, Lot 45, Borough of Richmond, as its Landmark Site.