

CONFERENCE HOUSE, Foot of Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island. Built about 1680.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 7960, Lot 16.

On September 13, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Conference House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 82). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation including representatives of the Conference House Association and the Park Department who both favored the proposed designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The most imposing surviving Seventeenth Century manor house on Staten Island is a magnificent two and one-half story fieldstone residence, constructed between the years 1680 and 1688, now called the Conference House. The wood frame lean-to in the rear is a later addition. The cellar kitchen, with its arched brick wine vault, the exterior roofline and brick parapet gables, together with the windows have been restored to the approximate appearance of the period. The house is rectangular in plan with a centrally designed hall and has an attic of immense dimensions. The stone masonry, impressively bold in appearance, is characteristic of the medieval influence in some of our early Colonial architecture.

The manor house was built by Captain Christopher Billopp as the seat of the Manor of Bentley, a title which was conferred upon it by Governor Dongan in 1676, along with additional grants of land given to Billopp in 1687. During the Revolutionary War, the manor house was owned and inhabited by Captain Christopher Billopp's grandson, Colonel Christopher Billopp. The Colonel was the leader of the Tory element on Staten Island. As a result, the house and land were ultimately confiscated by the State of New York after the Revolution. This house is celebrated as the scene of the abortive peace conference held there on September 11, 1776 between Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Edward Rutledge, representing the American Side, and for the British, Lord Richard Howe, Admiral of the British Fleet, assisted by Henry Strachey, Howe's secretary. The purpose of the meeting was to seek a peaceful settlement of the Revolutionary War, but these efforts proved futile since the Americans refused to renounce their demands for independence.

The house continued as a residence for many years but fell into disuse until it was acquired by the City of New York and the Conference House Association in 1929. The interiors of the manor have been furnished with period pieces associated with the Colonial period and the house is now under the supervision and management of the Conference House Association. The restored house is located upon Park Department land and is open to the public as a museum. The D.A.R. and Philemon rooms, on the first floor, are noteworthy as well as the Colonial chamber and the room set aside for a Benjamin Franklin National Museum on the second floor.

An account of the Manor House, written in 1846, describes it thus: "In approaching New York from Philadelphia by the Amboy route few objects are more striking to the traveller's eye, than a high, ancient-looking stone edifice situated near the water on the extreme western end of Staten Island." It is now 120 years since this description was made, and it is still valid. In the search for notable places, this beautiful and historic spot has always attracted both the artist and the historian.

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 Conference 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 the Conference House is one of the notable manor houses of New York State, that it is the oldest two-story stone house on Staten Island, that it is an important example of the Medieval Survival architectural style in New York City, that this building has great architectural character and distinction and that it is celebrated as the site of the famous peace conference held during the Revolutionary War, an event of historical importance in New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 Conference House, Foot of Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island, Borough of Richmond and designates Tax Map Block 7960, Lot 16, Borough of Richmond, as its Landmark Site.