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Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 25, 1980 Designation List 138
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EDGEHILL CHURCH OF SPUYTEN DUYVIL (United Church of Christ) originally Riverdale Presbyterian Chapel, 2550 Independence Avenue, Borough of The Bronx. Built 1888-89; architect Francis H. Kimball.

Landmark Site: Borough of Bronx, Tax Map Block 5743, Lot 15.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received a letter in support of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The small, asymmetrically massed church now known as the Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil (United Church of Christ), is a rare survivor from the period when the Spuyten Duyvil section of the Bronx was a sparsely populated area at the northern edge of New York City. The church was organized in 1869 as a mission chapel affiliated with the Riverdale Presbyterian Church. The chapel served the workers at the nearby Johnson Iron Foundry and its history is closely connected with the family of Isaac G. Johnson. In 1888 Francis H. Kimball, one of New York City's most prominent architects, was commissioned to design a new chapel for the small Spuyten Duyvil congregation. Kimball designed an eclectic building that combines a variety of stylistic forms in an unusual manner, creating a picturesque structure that is dramatically expressive of its hilly, rural setting.

Until the Spuyten Duyvil section was developed with high-rise apartment buildings following the construction of the Henry Hudson Parkway, it was a rural area composed primarily of large riverside estates and country houses. The one intrusion into the peaceful, rural character of the area was the Johnson Iron Foundry located in the southern portion of Spuyten Duyvil, on a peninsula that jutted into Spuyten Duyvil Creek. The Johnson Iron Foundry was founded by Elias Johnson following the 1853 liquidation of the Johnson, Cox & Fuller stove foundry in Troy, New York. Elias Johnson sent his son Isaac Gale Johnson to New York to acquire a site for the foundry. The younger Johnson purchased land in Spuyten Duyvil, then part of Westchester County, because of its location near vital means of transportation and near the large New York City market. The Johnson and Cox families also purchased 170 adjoining acres and laid out a village originally called Fort Independence. The name was soon changed to Spuyten Duyvil since Fort Independence had actually been located farther to the east.¹

The Johnson Iron Foundry and the adjoining Spuyten Duyvil Rolling Mill Co., owned by Elias Johnson and David Cox, were extremely successful particularly during the Civil War, and by the 1860s they employed about 300 people.² Small houses and a school for the workers' children were erected north of the factory. Although the Spuyten Duyvil Rolling Mill Co. closed in 1883, the Johnson foundry remained in operation until 1923 when the

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peninsula on which the factory was located, was condemned by the city. The land was destroyed in order to improve navigation between the Harlem and Hudson Rivers. The only remnants of this period of Spuyten Duyvil's history are a few small frame buildings clustered under the Henry Hudson Bridge on Johnson and Edsall Avenues, and the Edgehill Church.

When Issac Johnson purchased the land in Spuyten Duyvil for his family's iron foundry, the nearest church was over a mile away. Johnson was a devout Baptist and sought to impart religious teachings to his workers. He started a small Sunday school class in the office of the foundry, and in 1869 he leased land in the area to the Riverdale Presbyterian Church for a chapel. A small wooden chapel structure was erected at this time on Puddler's Lane, located near the junction of present-day Johnson Avenue and Kappock Street.

Although the congregation of the Riverdale Presbyterian Chapel was never large (most of the foundry workers were Irish Catholics), it outgrew its original building, and in 1885 members of the Riverdale Presbyterian Church signed a document subscribing money "for the purpose of building a Presbyterian Church at Spuyten Duyvil."³ The church was to be built on land donated by Mary E. Cox, the wife of one of Johnson's partners. By June, \$3,300 had been raised for the construction of the chapel, the cost of which was estimated at \$3,500 excluding furnaces and furnishings.⁴ In January, 1889 "the matter of [the] old chapel... [was] referred to Mr. Isaac Johnson with full power to sell and apply the proceeds towards the expense of the new chapel."⁵ The designs for the new chapel were submitted by Francis Kimball in 1888, but construction did not begin until April 1, 1889. The records of the New York City Buildings Department record that work was completed on the church by April 29, 1889, - a very short construction period.

Architect Francis Hatch Kimball (1845-1919) was a major figure in the New York City architectural world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His work spans a period of great stylistic and technological change in American architecture. Kimball's work evolved with the changing architectural scene, and he designed some of the finest and most innovative buildings of the period. Early in his career, Kimball managed the Hartford office of Boston architects Rogers & Bryant. While still in Hartford, he was commissioned to supervise the construction of English architect William Burges' Victorian Gothic style building for Trinity College. Kimball was sent to London and worked in Burges' office for a year. This experience had a tremendous influence on his career.

In 1879 Kimball arrived in New York City where his work included churches, clubs, theaters, office buildings, and an occasional residence. His earliest major building in New York, designed in 1882 with the assistance of Thomas Wisedell, was the Moorish style Casino Theatre at Broadway and West 39th Street (now demolished). This is the first of a series of buildings that reflect Kimball's mastery of the use of ornamental terra-cotta. The Casino Theater was followed by such notable buildings as the Catholic Apostolic Church (1885)

at 417 West 57th Street; the Emmanuel Baptist Church (1885-87) at 279 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn; the Montauk Club (1889-91) at 19-25 Eighth Avenue, Brooklyn; Harrigan's Theatre; later the Garrick Theatre (1890, demolished) at 63-67 West 35th Street; and the Fifth Avenue Theatre (1891-92, demolished), at 1185 Broadway. Kimball was also a pioneer in the development of the skyscraper. His most notable surviving office towers are the Empire Building (1895, designed with George Kramer), at 71 Broadway and the Trinity and United States Realty Company Buildings at 111 and 115 Broadway (1904-1907).

The Edgehill Church was one of Kimball's smaller commissions, but it is, nonetheless, one of his most beautiful. One can only speculate as to why Kimball was chosen to design the building. One possible explanation is that Isaac Johnson, who was responsible for the construction of the church, was familiar with the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn, one of Kimball's most magnificent designs. This church was completed in 1887, at the time that the Riverdale Presbyterian Church was contemplating the erection of a new chapel. Despite his association with the Presbyterian Church, Isaac Johnson was a Baptist and he may have been favorably impressed by the well-publicized Emmanuel Baptist designs and have decided to hire Kimball for his own project.

Kimball chose to design the Spuyten Duyvil chapel in a picturesque manner that blends forms derived from a number of styles popular during the late 19th century, all arranged in an asymmetrical manner that takes into account the sloping nature of the site. The Edgehill Church, with its Richardsonian stone base, its bands of square-cut and imbricated shingles, its half-timbered Tudor gables, and its Gothic trefoil-arched windows, is representative of a movement in American architecture that began in the 1870s and led to a great eclecticism in rural architecture. This combination of materials and details, borrowed from many stylistic sources, reached its maturity in the summer houses and suburban residences designed in the Shingle style. Most of these houses were large shingle and clapboard buildings with a graceful, undulating massing. Some, such as McKim, Mead & White's Samuel Tilton Residence (1881-82), in Newport; Wilson Eyre's Charles A. Newhall Residence (c.1881) in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, and his Richard L. Ashurst Residence (c.1885) in Overbrook, Pennsylvania; and Bruce Price's William Kent Residence (1885) at Tuxedo Park, New York, combine the use of stone and shingles with Tudor half timbering.⁶

Most Shingle style churches were related to the neighboring houses in their architectural form, and generally have asymmetrical massing accentuated by picturesque towers and other projections. Some use Gothic forms such as pointed-arch openings to increase the ecclesiastical feeling. Only a few of these churches used the variety of forms and materials found on the Spuyten Duyvil building. One of the earliest examples of an asymmetrical country church that combines materials in a picturesque manner, is Richard Morris Hunt's St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Islip, New York, designed in 1878.⁷ This building,

with its half-timbered chancel and base, band of imbricated shingles, steep sloping roofs, and bell cote, resembles the Scandinavian churches that Hunt saw when he visited Norway. Kimball's church has much in common with Hunt's more exotic design.

A Church that is stylistically related to that at Spuyten Duyvil and which Kimball may have been aware of before he designed his church, is the Church of the Holy Spirit, Mattapan, Massachusetts, designed by Rotch & Tilden and published in the American Architect and Building News in 1886.⁸ Like the Edgehill Church, this small building has a rubble stone base, a rounded projection, half-timbered gables, a clearly delineated chancel, and pointed-arch windows. The Spuyten Duyvil and Mattapan churches, and others like them, are all part of a movement in the late 19th century that allowed for a new freedom in the design of rural churches in contrast to the earlier adherence to the Gothic Revival style.

The Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil is a small building constructed on a steep sloping site. The building is fully visible only from the south; from the north it is partly hidden by the slope of the hill. By exploiting the natural terrain when designing the church, Kimball was able to vary the appearance of the building from every angle, thus adding to its picturesque qualities.

The church rests on a high stone base laid in random ashlar. This massive base supports the walls composed of lighter bands of shingles and the half-timbered gables. The building is entered from the east through a peaked-roof porch that projects from the larger east gable. This porch has a narrow rectangular door flanked by blind wooden panels all set below a segmental arch topped by a half-timbered gable. The date of the building's design, 1888, is carved into the horizontal timber at the base of the gable, while the central vertical timber is inscribed with a cross. The gable is lined by a rustic bargeboard with a Greek Cross carved into its peak. A row of three rectangular windows set within trefoil arches lights each side of the porch. On the main front bands of square-cut and imbricated shingles run above the stone base and are interrupted by a single group of three narrow trefoil-arched windows. A half-timbered gable, lit by three smaller trefoil-arched windows, rise above. A wooden bargeboard runs along the slope of the gable. This element is connected to the main structure by a series of mortars and tenons held together by large iron pins. The infill between the timber elements is created by panels, each with rusticated stone incising, that are affixed to the facade.

The south front of the church is the section that is most prominently visible from the street. This facade is arranged in a series of projecting and recessed masses, and the textural contrast of the various materials is particularly evident here. The heavy stone base on this facade is relieved by modest rectangular openings that lead to the church undercroft. Above the base, the wall is covered with five rows of square-cut shingles and four of imbricated shingles. A small rounded extension projects from the right side of this facade, creating a picturesque transition between the east and south fronts.

This graceful element is lit by narrow Gothic windows. The short nave with its triple group of trefoil windows, extends from the rounded projection and connects it visually to the transept. The nave windows, as well as most of the others on the church are composed of semi-opaque, yellow leaded glass with white glass borders. The steep sloping roof, extends down over the nave windows, creating an interesting, ever-changing pattern of light and shadow. A shallow transept extends out from the nave. The main front of this transept is articulated by a pointed arch filled by a signed Tiffany stained-glass window. The gable is ornamented with wooden half timbering in a square pattern and is lined by a bargeboard similar to that described on the front gable. Each side facade of the transept has a single opening; that to the west is filled with a small Tiffany window.

The massing of the church steps back gradually to the west connecting the transept with the shallow, but clearly delineated, chancel. Like the porch on the front facade, the chancel, with its high stone base, shingle bands, large compound-arch window, and narrow expanse of half timbering, projects from a larger half-timbered gable. The timbering on the rear gable is slightly more ornate than that found elsewhere on the church.

The north side of the church, much of which is set below the crest of the hill, is much simpler than the other facades. The front porch connects with the nave on this facade forming a continuous band of shingles interrupted only by groups of trefoil windows. The gable of the north transept does not have the half timbering found elsewhere, but is clad entirely in wooden shingles. Two of the stained-glass windows in this transept were designed by Tiffany Studios.⁹ The most prominent feature of the north facade is a tall stone chimney that rises from the left side of the transept. This chimney serves as a visual anchor, linking the church to Independence Avenue above.

The variety of roof slopes provided by the nave, transepts, chancel, entrance porch and round extension, adds to the picturesque quality of the building by providing a constantly changing profile as one moves past or around it. These roof slopes were originally clad with wooden shingles that matched those on the main facades. These were removed when New York City's fire code outlawed the use of wooden shingles as a roofing material. The sloping roof surfaces are accentuated by a handsome bell cote located at the crossing. This small shingled element, with its steep sloping concave roof and bell-shaped opening visually anchors the entire structure.

Although not the subject of this designation, the interior of the church is notable for its rustic simplicity and sophisticated craftsmanship. Inside the porch, heavy wooden doors with ornate iron hardware open into the short nave which is accented by wooden crossbeams with open trefoil arches. The crossing is formed by a simple wooden groin vault, also articulated by trefoil-arch cutouts. Small light bulbs are located at intervals along all of the ceiling beams, creating a golden glow that suffuses the interior. The church retains

its original altar furniture, organ case, trefoil-arch woodwork, and handsome leaded-glass narthex screen.

The four Tiffany stained-glass windows in the transepts are particularly beautiful when viewed from the interior. The large window in the north transept. "The Sower," was given in memory of Isaac G. Johnson and his wife Jane E. Johnson by their children. The corresponding "Shepherd and His Flock" window in the south transept was given in memory of Arthur Gale Johnson (1862-1916). The smaller windows located on the west side of each transept are set within handsome stencilled enframements with gold backgrounds. The window in the north transept shows a small child and is in memory of Isaac G. Johnson, Jr. (1882-1893). The magnificent "River of Life" window in the south transept is in memory of Gerald Bradley Johnson (1900-05) and Lloyd Ramsay Johnson (1906-07).

The Riverdale Presbyterian Church maintained its connection with the Spuyten Duyvil chapel until 1917 when the chapel became an independent congregation. Although affiliated with the Presbyterian church, the chapel had been a nondenominational entity referred to as a "Union Church Organization" in the Trustee Minutes of the Riverdale Presbyterian Church.¹⁰ On April 29, 1917, the trustees noted that "This organization now desired to incorporate and asks that this property be transferred by the present Trustees to the Board of Trustees of the new organization."¹¹ In September the Trustees voted to sell the chapel and land to the new Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil for \$1.00.¹² In 1939 the Spuyten Duyvil Church became affiliated with the Congregational denomination. In 1957 the Congregational Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church merged, forming the United Church of Christ, the present affiliation of the Edgehill Church.

Although its congregation has dwindled, the Edgehill Church remains an important anchor in an area that has seen a tremendous amount of change in the past few decades, as large urban apartment buildings altered the neighborhood's peaceful rural character. The church is both an important architectural monument and one of the few reminders of a past era in Spuyten Duyvil's history.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p.330.
2. William A. Tieck, Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil: An Historical Epitome of the Northwest Bronx, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1968), p. 115.
3. Riverdale Presbyterian Church, Document dated November 17, 1886.
4. Riverdale Presbyterian Church, Trustees Minutes, p.45, June 13, 1887. When building specifications were submitted to the New York City Buildings Department on August 21, 1888, the cost was estimated at \$5,000.
5. Ibid, p. 48, January 16, 1887.
6. See Vincent Scully, The Shingle Style and the Stick Style, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955 revised 1971).
7. See Montgomery Schuyler, "Works of the Late Richard M. Hunt," Architectural Record, 5 (October-December 1895), pp. 122-123.
8. American Architecture and Building News, 20(December 25, 1886), no. 574.
9. No signature is visible on the small window, but it probably dates from 1916 when the other windows were placed in the church. The signature may be covered by the window enframingent.
10. Ibid, p. 71 April 29, 1917.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, p. 73, September 30, 1917.

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 Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil 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 Commissioner further finds that, among its important qualities, the Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil is a beautiful asymmetrically massed, picturesque structure; that it was designed by Francis H. Kimball, one of the leading architects of the late 19th century; that it is a particularly dramatic structure because of its hilly site; that it combines elements of many different styles in an unusual manner that is reflective of late 19th century taste; that it is related to the early history of the village of Spuyten Duyvil which developed around the Johnson Iron Foundry, whose owner Isaac G. Johnson was closely associated with the church for much of his life; that it contains four fine stained-glass windows designed by Tiffany Studios; and that the church is one of the few remnants of the period when Spuyten Duyvil was a quiet, rural area at the northern edge of New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Edgehill Church of Spuyten Duyvil, Borough of the Bronx, and designates Tax Map Block 5743, Lot 15, Borough of Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Riverdale Presbyterian Church. Trustees Minutes. 1869-1917.
- "Riverdale Presbyterian Church 1863-1973," pamphlet, n.d.
- Schuyler, Montgomery. "The Works of Francis H. Kimball." Architectural Record, 7(April-June, 1898), 477-518.
- Tieck, William A. Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil: An Historical Epitome of the North Bronx. Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1968.