

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, 137-16 Northern Boulevard, Flushing, Borough of Queens.
Built in 1694, enlarged 1716-19; architects unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 4977, Lot 26.

On April 28, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Friends Meeting House in Flushing and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission has discussed this proposed designation and the City's Landmarks Preservation program with members of the Society of Friends at a conference held in the Meeting House.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Meeting House of the Religious Society of Friends in Flushing dates back to 1694. At that time a small frame structure, the easterly third of the present building, was built on land acquired two years previously by John Bowne and John Rodman, both well-known leaders of the Friends. In 1716-1719 the building was enlarged to its present size. The division between the two construction periods is proven by internal structural evidence and is apparent on the south side from the different spacing of the windows. The chimney rises on the line of the original west wall.

The edifice is a prime example of medieval survival in its proportions and framing system. It is a plain rectangular building erected on a frame of forty-foot oak timbers, each hand hewn from a single tree. The architectural interest of the building is derived chiefly from its unusually steep hip roof; the roof is almost as high as the two stories below it. This feature can be traced to the high steep roofs of medieval Holland, which had changed from gable roofs to the hip shape in the 17th century.

The Meeting House is well proportioned. Both walls and roof are covered with shingles. The wide spacing and small size of the windows on the second floor are distinctly English medieval in character though these windows have muntined sash and six-over-six panes. The larger windows at the ground floor have twelve-over-twelve panes. Both the entrances on the south front, one for men and one for women, have double doors. The porch, added along this side in the 19th century, is supported by slender square columns, and its shingled roof echoes the hip roof of the building. Simplicity is the keynote, both outside and inside, as the Friends desired that no worldly ostentation should distract their attention from worship.

This is the oldest house of worship standing in New York City, and one of the oldest in the country. The first meeting held in this building occurred on November 24, 1694. The importance of the building to the Society of Friends was soon recognized. In 1695, formation of the New York Yearly Meeting for the province included agreement that it be held at the Flushing Meeting House. It continued to assemble there from 1696 to 1778.

The Long Island Quakers achieved prominence from their very earliest years. In 1657, when Director General Stuyvesant forbade their worship, Flushing officials and citizens signed the "Flushing Remonstrance". This was perhaps the earliest demand for religious liberty made by American colonists. A few years later, when John Bowne was banished, he argued their case in Holland. As a result, the "Liberty of Conscience, according to the Custome and Manner of Holland," granted to Flushing in its charter of 1645, was extended in 1663 to establish religious liberty throughout the Province of New Netherland. After the English conquest, the Quakers of New York were given permission to hold meetings for worship.

Friends Meeting House

As early as 1716 the Flushing Meeting House was the scene of preaching against slavery by William Burling and John Farmer. They were followed by John Woolman, Matthew Franklin who is buried here and Elias Hicks, all of whom attacked the slavery problem during the colonial period. John Murray, Jr., also buried here, was the founder, in 1785, and first treasurer of the New York Society for the Manumission of Slaves. In his role as founder also of the New York Public School Society, Murray is considered the father of public education in New York City.

After the disastrous Battle of Long Island in 1776, the Flushing Meeting House was briefly used by the British army as a prison. During the remainder of the British occupation, to 1783, the building served as a storehouse for hay and as a hospital. In 1785 it was reopened for services, and is still used for this purpose.

The burial ground of the Meeting House has the quiet beauty of grass and trees. Graves were not marked before 1835 and the later graves have only simple low grave-stones, any form of ostentation being inconsistent with Quaker beliefs. The land had been given for a burial ground as early as 1667 by John Bowne. In addition to those mentioned above, Joshua Kimber who "kept school" in the former nearby Friends School is buried here as well as Samuel Leggett, organizer and president in 1823 of the New York Gas Light Company -- one of the predecessor companies of Consolidated Edison. He was the first resident of New York City to have his home lighted by gas.

The pleasant landscaped setting of the Meeting House was formerly set apart from Northern Boulevard by a picket fence; it now has a stone wall. The building still faces south, however, with its back to the street. In this seclusion from the passing traffic, a feeling of inherent peace survives in perfect accord with the simple charm of the grey shingled building and the sense of a long continued history of quiet prayer and work for the community.

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 Friends Meeting House in Flushing 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 Friends Meeting House in Flushing is the oldest house of worship still standing in New York City and one of the oldest in the country, that simplicity is the keynote of the structure, that the building is a prime example of medieval survival in its proportions and framing system and that it stands today as a reminder of New York City's earliest years and of the important contribution to the City made by the Society of Friends.

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 Friends Meeting House, 137-16 Northern Boulevard, Flushing, Borough of Queens and designates Tax Map Block 4977, Lot 26, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.