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Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 13, 1970, Number 5
LP-0673

ROBERT COLGATE HOUSE "Stonehurst" (now the Nicholas Katzenbach House), 5225 Sycamore Avenue, Borough of The Bronx. Built 1860-61; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 5937, Lot 458.

On April 28, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Robert Colgate House, "Stonehurst" 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. One speaker testified in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner of this house has informed the Commission that he favors the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In one of his rare bursts of enthusiasm, John T. Scharf, the noted historian of Westchester County, described the Robert Colgate house as "one of the finest residences on the Hudson," adding that "the resources of wealth and refined taste have joined to make it a thing of beauty." "Stonehurst," as the house is called, is magnificently situated on land which commands an extensive view of the Hudson River.

The extraordinary quality of the grey Maine granite of which it is constructed and the expert jointing of the random ashlar have to be seen to be appreciated. The fine cutting, shaping and surfacing of the granite were all carried out on the site.

"Stonehurst" is quite different from other Italianate mansions in the Hudson River Valley. A possible source of inspiration for its design is clearly the tradition of the Anglo-Italianate villa, of which John Nash's "Cronkhill" (1802) in Shropshire, England, was the pioneer structure. The architect of "Stonehurst" remains unknown, but either he or the owner, Robert Colgate, may have been aware of this English work.

"Stonehurst," however, has a classical flavor and a symmetry which are most unusual within the romantic and generally asymmetrical Anglo-Italianate villa tradition. A bold, semi-circular two-story projection, at the center of both the river and south facades, expresses the full width of the rooms within. The westerly projection is further emphasized by the dramatic sweep of an encircling porch facing the Hudson. An all-encompassing, low-pitched roof with broad eaves surrounds a flat deck which was originally protected by a balustrade. The roof-line follows the outline of the house and is broken by dormer windows and chimneys. The round-arched windows, expressively emphasized by handsome stonework, are in the Italianate tradition.

The impressive entrance facade of "Stonehurst," at the north, is especially classical in spirit. It features a bull's eye window, emphasized by four key-stones, in cruciform arrangement, set beneath a low-pitched central gable. The dignified entrance, at the head of short flight of steps, is flanked by porches. A massive pair of paneled doors, in an arched opening, leads into the house.

"Stonehurst" displays a sensitive response to its splendid setting. This is characteristic of the age of Emerson and the transcendentalists and illustrates the rise of interest in landscape architecture and landscape painting. The rooms in the projecting portions of the house all have wonderful views in three directions through the large windows. Easy access to the outside is afforded by French doors opening onto the verandas.

Robert Colgate purchased the land for his mansion on May 10, 1860 from Ann Cromwell. Her husband had been associated with the syndicate which, in 1852, had purchased over one hundred acres of land from William G. Ackerman, in anticipation of the development of Riverdale as a choice area for country estates.

Robert Colgate House

By the early 1860s Riverdale-on-Hudson had become a favorite summer retreat for rich New York merchants and their families. As noted by a writer in Putnam's Monthly Magazine in 1856, all this was made possible by the new Age of Steam. The development of the eastern shore of the Hudson River was largely the result of the initiation of passenger service, in 1847, on the New York and Hudson River Railroad.

When New York City took over the West Bronx, incorporating it in the City limits in 1874, its rural quality was threatened and "Riverdale", the group of villas above the Hudson, might have lost its curvilinear streets and irregular-shaped properties. Frederick Law Olmsted and the City civil engineer submitted a report in 1876, which argued for the preservation of those streets which followed the natural contours of the terrain and that this area would continue to provide excellent sites for villas for those New Yorkers who might wish to enjoy a country atmosphere within City limits, with obvious tax advantages accruing to the City. The recommendations of this report prevailed, and Riverdale retained its character. In preserving what remains of these large country estates, and their mansions, we are aware of their rural background.

Robert Colgate (1812-1885), merchant and philanthropist, was the eldest son of William Colgate, pioneer soap manufacturer. He was named Robert after his grandfather, who had emigrated to America from England. In 1845 Robert established the Atlantic White Lead and Linseed Oil Works in Brooklyn. R. Colgate & Co. became one of the largest dealers in paint and linseed oil in the country. He was a generous supporter of the American Museum of Natural History, of which he was a founder and vice-president, the Manhattan Eye and Ear Infirmary, and the Hospital for the Ruptured and Crippled. The Riverdale Presbyterian Church was organized in 1863 at a meeting in Robert Colgate's house; Sunday School classes were held here until the church was completed later the same year. Colgate died at "Stonehurst" on July 4, 1885.

The present owner is Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who played a prominent role in the racial integration of southern universities in the course of his service in the Department of Justice under President Kennedy. He was Attorney General and Undersecretary of State during the Johnson administration.

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 Robert Colgate House "Stonehurst" 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 Robert Colgate House, "Stonehurst" is one of the finest of the Hudson River country houses of the mid-19th century, that it is a notable example of the Anglo-Italianate style, that the planning of the house expresses a sensitive response to the beauty of its setting, and that the house originally was, and is now, associated with distinguished owners.

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 Robert Colgate House, "Stonehurst", (now the Nicholas Katzenbach House), 5225 Sycamore Avenue, Borough of The Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 5937, Lot 458, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.