

1969

Landmarks Preservation Commission
August 26, 1969, Calendar No. 2
LP-0397-A

VOORLEZER'S HOUSE, 59 Arthur Kill Road, Borough of Richmond.
Built about 1695.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 2278, Lot 1 in part,
consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 11, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of a Richmondtown Historic District (Item No. 15) which included this building. 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.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Richmondtown, in which this house is located, is an unusual survival of an early town and county center. It represents a cross section of development, varying from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century. Historically and geographically the center of Staten Island, Richmondtown is about seven miles from St. George and is located in LaTourette Park.

The town is in process of restoration and reconstruction. Certain notable buildings on Staten Island, which would otherwise have been lost, have been moved to Richmondtown to insure their preservation. Some reconstructions are planned to fill in historical gaps. Some modern buildings, in character with their surroundings, will also be added to provide necessary services. Streets within the area will be closed to vehicular traffic; peripheral highways will give access to parking fields and to the visitors' entrance.

The houses will eventually be completely furnished and shops equipped with tools to show how previous generations lived and worked. Quiet tree-lined streets, gardens and orchards will form an attractive part of the setting of the town.

The Richmondtown Restoration, which includes this house within its boundaries, is the only project of its kind in the metropolitan region. It is administered by the Staten Island Historical Society under a contract between the Society and the New York City Department of Parks.

The Voorlezer's House, a building standing on its original site, was built by the Dutch Church in 1695 as a church, school and a house for their Voorlezer, a Dutch word meaning lay reader, clerk or teacher. This building, the oldest known elementary school building in the United States, is restored and open to the public. The building is a two-story frame clapboard structure, original except for its restored exterior.

History

The first European colonists settled in the area that is now known as Richmondtown in about 1680, the date of the first land grant. In 1695 the combined church, school and home for the lay reader and school teacher, known as the Voorlezer, was built. In 1696 the Dutch received a lease of land in Coclestown (Richmondtown) upon which stood the Voorlezer's house. This hamlet was probably known as Coclestown because of the heaps of oyster and clam shells or "coccles" left there by the departing Indians.

Many of the buildings we see in Richmondtown today were built in the early part of the eighteenth century including a church, a county house, a jail and several houses. The Revolution had little effect on this quiet community, except for the fact that the courthouse and church were destroyed because the Dutch were believed to be sympathetic to the rebel cause. In 1898 Staten Island became a borough of the City of New York, and the many county functions and offices which had been at Richmondtown were moved to St. George. By 1920 all the remaining offices had also been transferred.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this house, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Voorlezer's House has a special character, special historic 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 Voorlezer's House is a fine early Dutch house having served a cultural purpose as a school and as residence of the Voorlezer, that it is an attractive feature of the Richmondtown Restoration and that the designation of this house in this report will in no way preclude its being incorporated in an Historic District at a later date.

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 the Voorlezer's House, 59 Arthur Kill Road, Borough of Richmond and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 2278, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.