

HUNTERS POINT HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Queens

The property bounded by the southern property lines of 21-12 through 21-48 45th Avenue, the eastern property line of 21-48 45th Avenue, 45th Avenue, 23rd Street, the northern property lines of 44-70 23rd Street and 21-55 through 21-09 45th Avenue, the western property line of 21-09 45th Avenue, 45th Avenue and the western property line of 21-12 45th Avenue.

On November 22, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Hunters Point Historic District (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Many of the residents of the proposed Historic District came to the hearing to indicate their support for the designation.

In a letter to the Commission which was read at the public hearing, the Hon. Mario J. Cariello, Borough President of Queens, said in part, "...let me commend you on your selection of the proposed site. I agree with you entirely that you may expect considerable support from this neighborhood. Feel assured that you have my support in discussing the proposal with this neighborhood...."

Support for the designation has been recorded by virtually all of the property owners in the District. Additional support has come from local businessmen, many residents of adjacent streets, and the clergymen of neighborhood churches.

At the public hearing, one of the witnesses, Salvatore Saraceno, testified as follows: "About eight years ago when I first saw 45th Avenue I thought it was an unusual street.... I was very fortunate to find one for sale, which I bought and renovated, changing it from a legal rooming house to a legal two family. I was even more fortunate to find a neighborhood with others interested in doing something constructive for their block. Many of the houses were run down. Over the years there has been much activity outside as well as inside these houses. People are repairing painting and generally fixing up their houses all the time. Many people who had lived on the block for some time who had been thinking of leaving have decided to stay".

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Hunters Point Historic District is a microcosm of the domestic architecture of New York City from the Civil War to the turn of the Century.

This small Historic District extends along Forty-Fifth Avenue between Twenty-First and Twenty-Third Streets. Chosen for its fine rows of houses, uniform in their character, this street presents a striking appearance. Many of the houses in the Hunters Point Historic District retain their original stoops and cornices, features which further enhance the feeling of unity along this avenue. Another quality of this neighborhood is the excellent state of preservation of these houses and the retention of so much of the original detail which gives them their distinctive character.

Particularly outstanding are those rows Numbers 21-12 through 21-20 on the south side and 21-21 through 21-29 on the north side. These handsome town houses with their pedimented doorways, and their fine segmental-arched windows, with arched lintels carried on brackets, lend an air of great dignity to this Avenue. The very fact that similar houses of such architectural distinction are to be found on both sides of the Avenue is in itself a striking feature. The practically uniform cornice line of the residences contributes greatly to the peaceful quality of a street which has remained but little changed since the time when it was first built up.

Architectural diversity is more evident toward the ends of the blocks where attractive buildings of later periods terminate this portion of the Avenue.

History of the District

Hunters Point, the name given to this section of Queens, once an actual ledge of rocks in the East River, was first settled early in the Seventeenth Century, when the Rev. Everardus Bogardus purchased it and nearby Ravenswood from the Netherlands' government. The fiery Bogardus was the first minister of the Dutch Church in New Amsterdam. Because of Bogardus' calling, the land became known as Dominie's Hook. Bogardus having been lost at sea, on November 26, 1652, the estate was decreed to his widow, Anneke Jans by Governor Peter Stuyvesant, and in 1669 the British governor, Sir Richard Nicolls, confirmed the decree.

Dominie's Hook became a part of Newtown, as organized by the British in 1664, and so remained until 1871. In 1697, Dominie's Hook was purchased by Captain Peter Praa, a French Huguenot, whose family had fled first to the Netherlands and later to the New World to escape religious persecution. Praa gave the land as a homestead to his daughter, Annettie, the wife of William Bennett. In 1800 her son, Jacob Bennett, changed the name from Dominie's Hook to Bennett's Point.

Jacob Bennett died in 1817, willing the land to his only child, Annetia, and her husband, Captain George Hunter. Nineteen other heirs contested the will because they doubted Jacob's mental soundness at the time the will was drawn. However, it was declared valid and in 1825 the name of the estate was changed to Hunters Point. The estate was left in trust to the three grandsons, Jacob, John B. and Richard, with the right to divide the property and sell it as they so chose.

This was done on June 17, 1835 when Jeremiah Johnson, a representative of Eliphalet Nott, President of Union College, Schenectady, bought the land for \$100,000. Union College was involved at the time, in an extensive program of expansion. Their speculation provided the impetus to develop the as yet unsurveyed farmland. Charles Perkins, an engineer, was employed to survey the Hunter farm and make a map of it. In 1853, the hill which formed the nucleus of the estate was levelled and the soil used to extend the shore line at Borden Avenue into the East River. Lots were sold from this map until 1861 when the Van Alst farm was added to the property, and Peter G. Van Alst made a new map of the combined areas. General McClellan conducted further surveys after the Civil War.

Changes in the Character of the Area

In 1861, the Long Island Railroad was persuaded to move its Brooklyn terminus to Hunters Point. Travelers from Manhattan now disembarked here from the Thirty-Fourth Street ferry to transfer to the railroad. Residents of Hunters Point thus saw Theodore Roosevelt on his way to Sagamore Hill and later witnessed the American troops as they were sent to fight in Europe during World War I. The movement marked the beginning of a change of character in the neighborhood as inns and taverns were opened to accommodate the commuters. In 1865 it was proposed that Hunters Point secede from agricultural Newtown and form a separate township. It was at first thought that the area would join the city of Brooklyn, but in 1870 it chose instead to become a part of the proposed Long Island City. Newtown, located at the eastern boundary of the new city, did retain its independence and forfeited the extraordinary prosperity Long Island City enjoyed.

Soon after the incorporation, the State Legislature authorized the moving of the Queens county seat to the new city, perhaps because of its proximity to the cities of New York and Brooklyn. In 1872, the State Legislature financed the building of a county courthouse in Hunters Point on land donated by Union College for that purpose. Hunters Point thus became the seat of government for both Long Island City and Queens County.

Also in the early seventies, construction was begun on East Twelfth Street (now Forty-Fifth Avenue). This land which includes the Historic District was once a part of the Van Alst farm. On September 16, 1670, two large plantations had been confirmed to George Van Alst. These remained quietly in the family for nearly two hundred years, until 1861 when they were purchased by the trustees of Union College as an addition to their Hunters Point holdings.

The stone houses erected were unique in Hunters Point, for most of the houses were wooden. The block became the neighborhood showplace and was known as "White Collar Row". The development was begun by Spencer B. Root of Greenfield, Massachusetts and John P. Rust of Brooklyn, New York who bought the land from Union College on December 22, 1870. Root and Rust are said to have gone bankrupt before they could fulfill their obligations. The original residents were old American families.

They were soon replaced by families of Irish descent. Many of these men were involved in the government of Long Island City, and the most colorful of them all was "Battle-Axe" Gleason, the last mayor of Long Island City. Gleason earned his name in July, 1888. The Long Island Railroad had put up a fence on Front Street (now Second Street) so that the public could not pass through without a railroad ticket. Gleason, mayor since 1886, and some supporters went to Front Street armed with axes and chopped the fence into small pieces. For forceful actions like this one, the voters repaid Gleason with successive re-elections and even brought him home-cooked dinners and champagne during a five day stay in jail. Gleason lived on what was then Twelfth Street in the 1880's.

In 1909, eleven years after Queens County was consolidated into New York City, the Queensboro Bridge connecting Manhattan and Long Island City was opened. The bridge made communication between the two boroughs quite simple. Many businesses moved to Long Island City which was then as convenient to reach as Manhattan itself. Several years later, elevated trains were extended to Long Island City and provided easy transportation for the workers in the new factories. Old Twelfth Street had by this time attracted theatrical performers. For them, the trains which passed a block away made Broadway seem nearby, but the noise and unpleasantness of the "El" forced many of the old families to move away. During the Depression, the houses were converted to multi-family dwellings which they still remain. The street has always remained quiet and tree-lined.

ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE

The Italianate, French Second Empire (Mansard-roofed), Neo-Grec and diverse styles of the 1890's are all represented by examples which range from fully developed expressions of the Italianate group to various later vernacular interpretations which, in their own right, illustrate the development of our architectural history.

There is not only a good range of architectural styles in this District but the outstanding feature is that the District is remarkably well-preserved. It has been spared the vicissitudes of changing uses and fashions which have, in so many analagous areas, served to destroy the original character of the architecture.

The area is essentially rectangular in shape. The head faces Twenty-third Street while the shaft extends along Forty-Fifth Avenue, a long block which runs westward toward the East River. The Manhattan skyline, which is clearly visible, forms a splendid backdrop as seen looking down the long perspective of the avenue with its trees, its stoops, and its brick and stone facades, which have remained virtually unchanged since the 1890's.

BUILDINGS IN THE DISTRICT

Forty-Fifth Avenue - North Side - From 21st Street to 23rd Street

Numbers 21-09 through 21-17

This group of five houses in the Italianate style was built in 1871-2 by and for Spencer Root and John Rust. It is three stories high with stuccoed basement and brick above.

The stoops, pediments over entrance doors, lintels and roof cornices are all intact. There are remains of the original iron areaway fence at No. 21-13. The wood cornice in each of the houses is supported by four brackets with acanthus leaves which break below the fascia board over the brick wall below. Between these brackets is a paneled fascia below a row of dentils and two smaller intermediate acanthus faced consoles. Over the front doors there are classical pediments carried on consoles. Between the brackets are paneled lintels with keystone. The window lintels are segmental-arched with cornices across the top.

Numbers 21-21 through 21-29

This group of five houses, of the same date as the preceding ones and also built by Root and Rust, is three stories high with basement and is built of Westchester stone throughout. These five houses together with the five matching houses on the south side of the Avenue (Numbers 21-12 through 21-20) form one of the finest groups of Italianate town houses in the City. Not only do they exemplify a late phase of the Italianate style, but they are in a remarkably good state of preservation, and their use of Westchester stone makes them virtually unique. These stone-faced houses have rustication at the basement floor, topped by a plain belt course. The window sills are molded and carried on brackets, and the window heads are segmental, with arched cornices crowning the lintels. The arched lintels of the first floor windows are paneled, and the cornices are projected some distance from the wall and are carried on ribbed brackets which are decorated with five pointed stars. The second floor lintels are a simplified version of those of the first floor. The third floor has flush, arched lintels with cornices over the tops. The handsome, projecting cornices are original and are similar to those described for Numbers 21-09 through 21-17.

Stoops, cornices, pediments over entrance doors, stoop balustrades and areaway balustrades are all intact. The woodwork of the front doors, with the exception of Numbers 21-21, is largely original. Over the front doors there are classical pediments carried on ornamental consoles. The doorways are round-headed with vermiculated keystone, and the pilasters supporting the consoles and the spandrels over the arch are paneled. The doors themselves are double. The bottom sections are deeply molded with a raised central panel. The middle sections have been glazed with the exception of Number 21-29 which retains its raised panel. The top panels, which are quadrant shaped, are glazed in all instances. The balustrades of the areaways are perforated with elongated arched openings; likewise the balustrades of the stoops are perforated with elongated openings arched at top and bottom. The octagonal newel posts have pointed Gothic panels. All the balustrades and yard railings are of composition stone.

Numbers 21-31 through 21-39

This group of five brick houses, also built in the early 1870's by Root & Rust, is three stories high with stuccoed basement. The houses are Italianate in style, and are essentially the same scale and proportion. Together with the others, they create a continuous row of 15 houses.

They retain most of their original architectural details, the one exception being No. 21-39 where the stoop has been removed and replaced by a basement entrance. The fine roof cornices, also intact, have brackets with acanthus leaf motifs similar to those described for No. 21-09 through 21-17. The classical pediments over the front doors on Numbers 21-31 and 21-33, are similar to those on Numbers 21-09 through 21-17. The front doors of Numbers 21-33 and 21-35 have their original woodwork somewhat modified by the introduction of glass in the middle panels. The original cast iron railings at the areaways of Numbers 21-31 and 21-35 are in place, and all the houses retain their original cast iron newel posts and handrails at the stoop, except No. 21-39.

Numbers 21-41 through 21-51

This group of six brick houses, also built by Root & Rust in the 1870's, is a much simpler version of the Italianate style. Three stories high with basement, they are on narrower lots (16 feet) than those already described; consequently, the window proportions are more vertical. All the lintels and sills are plain. Nos. 21-41, 21-49 and 21-51 retain their stoops and have attractive cast iron handrails. Number 21-47 also has its stoop but with iron handrails of a later period. The roof cornices are intact and are the same as described for Numbers 21-09 through 21-17.

Numbers 21-53 through 21-55

Built in the 1880's, these two houses - three stories plus basement - are French Second Empire in style. The first two stories of each are of brick, while the top story has a Mansard roof covered with slate with two dormer window

No. 21-53 has its original bracketed roof cornice and dormers. The window lintels and sills are plain. The front doorway has paneling in the reveals and is the original at No. 21-53. No. 21-55 is like No. 21-53 but the original front door, the cornice and the decorative woodwork on the dormers are missing.

Twenty-Third Street

Numbers 44-78 through 44-70

These five houses of 1887 are three windows wide; two of the windows are set into shallow bow-fronts. They are two stories high with a full basement. Stoops, cornices, lintels, doors and windows are all completely original. The sheetmetal roof cornice has a fascia displaying an acanthus scroll punctuated by brackets at wide intervals. The cornice has an egg and dart corona. The lintels have incised decorations at the impost blocks and at the keystones. The metal railings have ornamental scrolls at the widely spaced spindles which support the handrails. A conspicuous feature of the facades are the bow fronts with centered terra cotta inserts consisting of three square tiles with relief designs joined vertically. Numbers 44-78 has a sheetmetal bay window on 45th Avenue. The panels under the windows are decorated with metal bas reliefs in which scrolls, and calligraphic motifs supporting cartouches are freely mingled. These houses are designed in the modified Romanesque Revival style, with the exception of their Classical cornices.

Forty-Fifth Avenue - South Side - From 23rd Street to 21st Street

Number 21-48

Constructed in 1889, this yellow brick apartment house was built in the local vernacular and is three stories high with basement. The first floor has been altered, but the bracketed cornice and simple window lintels remain.

Numbers 21-46 through 21-42

The facades of these three brick apartment houses of 1889 have shallow, angular bays with sides which project obliquely from the wall. These three-sided bays have a window in each side. The bays extend the entire four stories of the building. The cornice is of sheetmetal. It has a high fascia with long brackets which support the boldly projected cornice. The lintels are supported at their ends by impost blocks which, in turn, rest on continuous stone band courses. All these elements are set flush with the wall and are without moldings. The spandrel panels are a very conspicuous feature of the facades. The decoration is made up of two patterns of header bricks set obliquely and head on. The two patterns are alternated over the facades in checkerboard fashion.

The decorative brickwork, banded with stone courses, and the high narrow windows are distinctive features. The high cornice which breaks around the three-sided bays gives the building a pronounced silhouette. The strong upward movement of the bays, united by vertical banding, makes these buildings interesting late examples of the Queen Anne style.

Numbers 21-40 through 21-36

This group of three wood houses, built in 1890, is two stories high with basement. The stoop at 21-40 has been removed, and the two other stoops are of steel. The facades are three windows wide. Two of the windows are coupled and have a slight projection which overhangs the basement. There is a steep-pitched gable at the roof. These houses have been covered with asbestos shingles. The roof lines, lintels, belt courses, fenestration and the doorways of Numbers 21-38 and 21-36 are original.

These houses are very much simplified versions of the Queen Anne style which flourished largely in the suburbs but was less commonly applied to the town house.

Number 21-34

The house at 21-34 45th Avenue (then 12th Street) was built in 1887 by a Mr. Burnell for his wife. Their daughter, Lotte, later played the Palace Theatre with a group called the "Piano Fiends". This single house, two stories plus basement, has a low basement of brick with the floors above made of wood. Clapboards are combined with vertical and horizontal timbers. The windows are joined vertically by timbers, and the spandrels are set with vertical and diagonal incised boarding. There are coupled windows on center and bays with single windows at either side. The details of the windows and the bracketed roof cornice are good expressions of frame construction.

Numbers 21-32 through 21-22

This fine group of six brick houses is two stories high with basement. It was built in 1887, and the stone stoops and the cornices are intact. Numbers 21-22, 21-24, 21-26 and 21-30 have their handsome original curvilinear design and wrought iron handrails at the stoop and areaway railings. Number 21-28 has its original door, and ironwork, but the stoop is constructed of concrete blocks. Number 21-32 has lost both its original ironwork and stoop, the ironwork being modern and the stoop of concrete block. The deep cornices are of wood with four Neo-Grec brackets. The lintels throughout are plain.

Numbers 21-20 through 21-12

Numbers 21-20 through 21-12 are the same as 21-21 through 21-29 on the opposite side of the street already described. All doors are original except those at No. 21-12. These houses are excellent representatives of a type which was widely used throughout the New York area. Well built, sedate, and well suited to their purpose, they stand as examples of the best of our domestic architecture of that period.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Hunters Point Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Hunters Point Historic District is a notable residential area, built over 90 years ago, which retains, on both sides of the street, a feeling of unity and repose, little changed since it was first built, that the excellent state of preservation of so much of its original detail gives it a distinctive character, and that it serves as a microcosm of the domestic architecture of the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century.

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 an Historic District the Hunters Point Historic District, Borough of Queens, consisting of the property bounded by the southern property lines of 21-12 through 21-48 45th Avenue, the eastern property line of 21-48 45th Avenue, 45th Avenue, 23rd Street, the northern property lines of 44-70 23rd Street and 21-55 through 21-09 45th Avenue, the western property line of 21-09 45th Avenue, 45th Avenue and the western property line of 21-12 45th Avenue.