

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 1, 1990; Designation List 225
LP-1707

HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE, 70 Satterlee Street, Borough of Staten Island.
Built late 1840s.

Landmark Site: The property consisting of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7966, Lot 75 and the adjacent mapped roadbed of Pittsville Avenue extending to the northern boundary of Conference House Park (formerly Tax Map Block 7960, Lot 100, now Block 7857, Lot 100).

On February 7, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Henry Hogg Biddle House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. Counsel for the estate of the owner expressed concern about designation, but took no position at the time of the hearing; no subsequent communication has been received by the Landmarks Commission from the owner or its representative.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Henry Hogg Biddle House, built in the late 1840s, is a rare surviving example of a house that combines in its design spring eave construction with Greek Revival style architecture. The French-derived spring or bell-cast eave was widely used on Staten Island from the late 17th century on. Its combination here with a two-story tall Greek Revival columned portico illustrates one of the most striking of the responses made by Staten Island builders to the high style Greek Revival residences built there by wealthy New York City merchants in the 1830s.

The Biddle House is particularly unusual in that it preserves an extremely rare, and possibly unique, instance on Staten Island and in the rest of New York City of double-height Greek Revival style porticoes used at the front and rear elevations of a structure, creating a dramatic and imposing effect. The twin porticoes of the Biddle House are a response to its attractive elevated location and provide it with impressive facades whether seen and approached from the street or from the waterfront. Its setting, which includes a long approach drive, fencing and plantings, enhances the character of the architecture.

The Biddle House design expresses the self-described status of its original owner, Henry Hogg Biddle, as a "gentleman," and his position as an important member of both the immediate community of Unionville and the larger village of Tottenville. Today the house stands as a major monument of 19th-century vernacular architecture on Staten Island.

Early History of the Biddle House Site¹

The immediate setting of the Biddle House, a long rectangular waterfront plot of approximately two acres, was once, like the entire southwestern end of Staten Island, part of the 1600-acre manorial grant received by Captain Christopher Billopp in 1676. Located about 900 feet south of the Biddle House, Billopp's manor house, a designated New York City Landmark known today as the Conference House, was constructed soon thereafter and occupied by four generations of that family.

To avoid forfeiture during the Revolutionary War period, Billopp's great-grandson, Colonel Christopher Billopp, divided the family lands, already diminished by early sales to slightly over a thousand acres, into nine farms of varying sizes, and sold them off between 1780-81. The Biddle House site was part of the 373-acre farm which, together with the former Billopp manor house, was acquired by Samuel Ward in 1781. In 1801 Ward's son Caleb, who occupied the Billopp residence until his death in 1834, sold the 30-acre waterfront parcel which includes the Biddle House site to Isaac Butler, Henry Biddle's future father-in-law.

Butler, a farmer, innkeeper and operator for several decades of the ferry to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, which docked near the foot of today's Amboy Road, was already in possession of an approximately 43-acre farm on the northern side of this major Staten Island thoroughfare.

Henry Hogg Biddle

Henry Hogg Biddle was born in New York City about 1806 as Henry Biddle Hogg. In 1828, Henry, his widowed mother Ann, and his two older brothers legally reversed their sur- and middle names to become known as Hogg Biddle.² Shortly thereafter, Henry and his mother moved to Staten Island; little more than a year later Ann Hogg Biddle died at age 57. She was the first of many Biddle family members to be buried in the graveyard at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Richmondtown.

In February 1831, Biddle married Isaac Butler's daughter Harriet; her father had died just three weeks earlier. Under the terms of Isaac's 1830 will, the 73-acre homestead farm was left to his son Cortlandt and daughters Harriet and Emily (another large farm near Princes Bay was left to his two older children). In 1831, Isaac Butler's estate was divided; thereafter, Henry Biddle seems to have been the person who made the principal decisions relating to the homestead farm.

The Biddle house appears to have been built after the death of Henry's first wife, who died in 1842. The dwelling occupied by Henry, Harriet, their two sons William Henry and Charles Stevens (baptized at St. Andrew's in 1837 and 1840), and Harriet's brother Cortlandt Butler, was probably the Butler farmhouse located closer to Amboy Road on the original portion of the Butler farm.

The available information concerning Henry Biddle's economic circumstances suggests a construction date for the house in the late 1840s. Biddle's profession is unknown, but he was actively involved in a number of real-estate transactions. In 1835 he obtained a substantial mortgage on

the entire Butler farm from the island's north-shore-based developers, William Staples and Minthorne Tompkins. Defaulting on the mortgage, he was able to re-acquire the Butler family farm in 1840 at a public auction. His land transactions in the following decade, however, suggest an improved economic status. A number of purchases and sales in the developing village of Stapleton which involved Biddle, Staples and Tompkins are recorded. During the same period, as the village of Tottenville entered a period of growth, Biddle also began to sell off small plots carved out of the northernmost reaches of the Butler farm. He also played a role in the c.1850 development of the Butler waterfront lands on the northern side of Amboy Road as a temperance park, picnic grounds and popular destination for day-trip steamboat excursions from Manhattan and New Jersey.³ It was during this period that he married his second wife, Margaret, in 1844. Biddle was thirty-eight; Margaret, born in New York City c. 1805, had moved to Staten Island about 1841.

Biddle's construction of an imposing stylish new residence near the southernmost portion of the Butler farm coincided with his improved economic status and significantly increased real-estate activities. It also coincided with the simultaneous emergence in the same vicinity of the tiny hamlet identified as "Unionville" on maps of the early 1850s; a quasi-urban development, Unionville apparently resulted from Biddle's 1847-48 sale of a large waterfront tract to William H. Rutan, who constructed his residence (still standing) and adjoining large shipyard and marine railway just south of the Biddle house site. While built on a portion of the old Butler farm, the Biddle House would seem to have been designed to convey the notion that it was a dwelling fit for a person of a status quite different from that of a local farmer. Although Biddle is not self-described as a "gentleman" in the censuses until 1860, the grandeur of his residence suggests he perceived himself as having attained that status some years earlier.

The two-acre setting immediately associated with the house, one defined very early in its history by fencing and outbuildings, as described in a deed of 1862, reinforced its image. Set back a considerable distance from the road, the Biddle House was approached by a drive of impressive length. From atop its waterside bluff it commanded a panoramic view westward over the Raritan Bay, a vantage point locally famous for its sunset views. The double porches are an imposing acknowledgment of this setting. Biddle lived in his grand house for the rest of his life.

Little is known about Biddle's later life. In 1862 the southern portion of the Butler farm was sold save for the two acres containing his house. His real estate transactions gradually diminished and ceased. Margaret Biddle died at age 76 in 1881. In 1882, Henry Biddle, having reached that same age, married Sarah Cortelyou, then 57. Five years later at the age of 81 Henry Biddle died and was buried in the family plot at St. Andrew's. His widow continued to reside in the Biddle House until her death in 1904, when it was sold by Henry's son Charles S. Biddle to the second of its three principal owners, George T. Brewster.

Architectural Significance of the Henry Hogg Biddle House

One of the most notable features of the Biddle House design is its slightly flared projecting spring eave, the use of which is a venerable construction technique imported from northwestern France and widely used on Staten Island from the late 17th century on. Its appearance at the mid-19th century Biddle House testifies to the persistence of this type of construction on Staten Island. In its combination of the spring eave with a two-story Greek Revival style portico, the Biddle House also illustrates one of the most striking of the responses made by local builders to the high style versions of this hugely popular mode which had appeared earlier on Staten Island in relative abundance. The Biddle House is of particular importance in that it preserves an extremely rare, possibly unique, instance in New York City of the spring eave and double-height portico used at both the front and rear elevations of a structure, endowing a relatively modestly-scaled building with striking profiles and an imposing presence.

Though the spring eave is commonly referred to as "Dutch Colonial," it is actually French in origin. Recent research on the structural systems employed in Staten Island's pre-1750 houses, including an in-depth examination of the sources and evolution of the spring eave, demonstrates that it was widely used in the northwestern provinces of France by the 17th century and possibly earlier.⁴ Termed a coyau and illustrated in Pierre Le Muet's Maniere de bien bastir, a builder's handbook published in 1664, the spring eave was formed by attaching slightly curved strips of wood to the lower ends of the rafters which rested on plates placed close to the inner edge of the wall; the outer wall edge rose somewhat higher to provide bracing for the plates. The coyau originally served a functional purpose, that of bridging the gap between the rafter ends and the outer face of the wall by continuing the roof slope over and beyond it. French Catholic settlers brought this construction technique to New France or Quebec and French Huguenots introduced it to New Netherland, the area comprised of Long Island, New Amsterdam, Staten Island, northern New Jersey and the Hudson Valley region.

The earliest surviving instance of a spring eave on Staten Island is the one employed for the c.1676 Billopp House, the nearby neighbor to the Biddle House. Constructed in a manner very similar to that employed in France, it has a relatively slight flare since the curved strips extend little more than a foot beyond the wall. Used with both single and double pitched or gambrel roofs (the latter framing system may also have French roots), the spring eave on Staten Island, and elsewhere in the New Netherland area, evolved into a deeper overhang over the course of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Supported on forward posts, it eventually formed a single story, often facade-wide, covered porch for the principal elevation.⁵ While the spring eave may originally have served a practical purpose by protecting the wall construction beneath it, the great popularity and enduring use of the form on Staten Island should probably be ascribed to its aesthetic appeal.⁶ The spring eave was so firmly embedded in the Staten Island building tradition that, when older architectural styles were supplanted by the newly fashionable Greek Revival, the spring eave was carried over and incorporated into the new style of building.

Introduction of the Greek Revival style to Staten Island coincided with the Island's transition, initiated by the introduction of a regular steam ferry service, from a sparsely settled, largely agricultural community to a location selected for several major institutions and large-scale planned suburban developments. Much of the new development was designed for a class of people new to Staten Island -- wealthy New York City merchants who were aware of the latest architectural styles. Beginning in the 1820s and proliferating in the 1830s, knowledgeable versions of the fashionable Greek Revival style were employed for both residential and institutional designs. In the 1840s and 1850s the Greek Revival was supplanted for such commissions by more picturesque styles, including the Gothic Revival and the Italianate, but in those same decades the Greek Revival was discovered by local Island builders, and it was only then that the style blossomed fully in vernacular residential versions built by the hundreds from one end of the island to the other.

Although the vernacular permutations of the style are numerous, Greek Revival elements in many cases were simply grafted onto houses that retained the basic forms, massing and scale of earlier 18th-century dwellings. "Greek Revival" for many local builders meant primarily an imposing main doorway with slender sidelights, multi-paned transoms, a panelled door -- all topped by some sort of entablature. At times the doorways were preposterously large in relationship to the scale of the houses they adorned. "Greek Revival" could also mean dentil moldings, corner antae, and attached one-story porches with the forward post capitals articulated to suggest capitals.⁷

While most of Staten Island's vernacular Greek Revival dwellings employ this simplified version of the style, it is clearly evident that the columned facades of the island's high style residences built in the 1830s had a significant impact on local builders and on some of their patrons -- an increasingly more affluent segment of the citizenry that had by the 1840s been sensitized to the expressive implications of the style. They too sought out the Greek Revival style for their homes as a way to identify themselves as important and influential members of their communities.

Although there were exceptions, local builders did not on the whole attempt to duplicate the columned facade in either of its two principal manifestations on the island -- the projecting pedimented portico fronting a wider cubic block, as seen in the Minard Lafever-influenced design for the Caleb Ward House (1835; a designated New York City Landmark), or the temple-fronted gable-end-to-the-street residences built in New Brighton during the 1830s.⁸ What the local builders did instead was apply a traditional deep spring eave to a standard earlier 19th-century residential design -- a longitudinally sited, two-story house of three or five bays. The spring eave was carried on giant forward supports (both coffered piers and the classical orders were used) to form a facade-wide quadristyle or hexastyle porch. A porch floor at the second-story level was sometimes introduced. Dozens of residences employing this combination of Greek Revival style porticoes and spring eaves were built in all sections of the island.⁹ The spring-eave-covered, quadristyle Greek Revival Doric porticoes of the Biddle House are obviously part of this vernacular tradition.

The unique double-height twin porticos of the Biddle House endow the relatively shallow structure with a sense of grand scale which exceeds its actual dimensions.¹⁰ Dramatic profiles are created at the gable ends of the building by the long sweep of the roof slopes as they span the deep porch to rest atop the imposing row of columns; the prominent eave returns emphasize the effect. The porticoes also provide the dwelling with an impressive facade whether seen and approached from the street or from the waterfront.

While earlier residences on Staten Island occasionally employed spring eave porches on the front and rear elevations (at least two survive), they were of but one story.¹¹ Instances of twin, colossal Greek Revival style porticoes on Staten Island other than those at the Biddle House are not known. Although the Biddle House is also distinguished by its two handsome main entryways and the tall ground story windows, it is the double portico usage which makes it such an outstanding example of vernacular Greek Revival style design on Staten Island and in New York City.

Later Owners of the Biddle House

Following the death of his second step-mother, Sarah Cortelyou Biddle, in 1904, Charles S. Biddle sold the family home and its surrounding grounds to the sculptor George T. Brewster who lived there until 1933. An 1886 graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Brewster was known for instituting life modeling classes at the Art Students League and the Rhode Island School of Design.¹² A member of the Cooper Union faculty after 1900, Brewster maintained his studio in a barn once located on the northern side of the property. The third long-term occupant of the Biddle House, Charles Petersen, a prominent citizen of Tottenville, purchased the house in 1943; the house is presently owned by the Petersen estate.

Description

Set on a bluff at the western or waterfront end of its long, narrow rectangular plot, the Biddle House is a two-and-a-half story, five-bay wide, gable-roofed, wood-frame structure distinguished by the deep two-story tall, facade-wide porticoes on its eastern and western elevations, Greek Revival style center portals, and decorative window enframements.

The house is placed on a deep below-ground stone foundation terminated above grade by brick. Access to both porches is provided by centrally located flights of wooden stairs. The stepped parapets flanking the longer flight on the western elevation (seven risers in contrast to four) indicate this was originally regarded as the principal facade. Giant Doric columns and coffered corner antae carry a simple entablature consisting of a stepped architrave and a returned cornice of modest dimensions. The combination of the paired spring eaves and porticoes creates a striking profile at the gable ends of the structure. The end walls are further emphasized by tall paired brick chimneys.

The principal elevations are dominated by identical center portals enframed by coffered pilasters carrying unadorned pediments. Paired recessed pilasters enframe the panelled doors and multi-paned transoms. The

wider decorative enframing of the windows above the portals -- louvered panels flank the openings -- add emphasis to the center doorways. The same window treatment adorns the attic-level windows at the gable ends of the structure. Window surrounds are eared throughout. Sills of the second story windows are carried on small curved brackets. Six-over-six sash is used except for the full-length first-story windows where the sash is six-over-nine.

Twentieth century alterations include the following: original clapboard covered by composition siding; conversion of a first-story window opening to a door opening on the southern elevation and the addition of a small covered porch and stairway to provide access to a relocated kitchen; the insertion of two small windows just west of this entryway; a hatchway added below the first-story window at the western end of this same elevation; and the removal of a cupola from the roof ridge.

Three outbuildings are located on the Landmark Site. A small wood-frame well-house stands just south of the kitchen entryway. A modern three-car garage of stuccoed cinderblock is located near the northern boundary; it is not a contributing feature of the site. Just south of the garage there is a small clapboard-clad former stable. Possibly constructed c. 1930, it is a contributing feature of the site. Other contributing site features include the terraced area with flagpole on the north side of the house; the dirt and gravel approach road leading to the house from Satterlee Street; the row of conifers on the southerly side of the approach road; and the group of conifers along the northern boundary. A portion of the Landmark Site is delineated by a post-and-rail fence. The Landmark Site also includes the entire mapped width of Pittsville Avenue which lies to the south of the post-and-rail fence on this side of the property; this strip of land, including the road, was once part of Biddle's two-acre house plot. The present Pittsville Avenue, a relatively modern thoroughfare, is a narrow dirt and gravel road edged by scrub growth and underbrush.¹³

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NOTES

1. Information in this section is taken from Shirley Zavin et al., "The Conference House, Staten Island, N.Y." (Historic Structure Report, 1980), passim.
2. "Chapter 108: An Act to Change the Names of Ann Hogg, George C. Hogg, John Hogg and Henry Hogg," Laws of the State of New York Passed at the 50th Session of the Legislature (Albany, 1827). All information pertaining to Henry H. Biddle and his family was collated from the following sources: Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; Richmond County, Surrogate's Court, Probate

Records; Staten Island Historical Society, Genealogical Index (includes some published obituaries); St. Andrews Episcopal Church, Records (on deposit at the Staten Island Historical Society); Staten Island Historical Society, Gravestone Inscriptions; Staten Island Historical Society and Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences Archive, New York State and United States Government census records, 1830-1880 (microfilm). The author thanks Ms. Marjorie Johnson, Staten Island Historical Society archivist, for making information available during a period when the collection was closed to the public.

3. Biddle's Grove or Mount Hermon (both names were initially used interchangeably) was located on a portion of old Butler farm which Biddle did not sell until 1867. He seems never to have been actively involved in the management of the grove, but apparently leased the grounds to a series of operators. Hugh Powell, research assistant, Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, has compiled two large collections of newspaper clippings ("The Iconography of Staten Island," and "Staten Island During the Civil War Period") which include many advertisements for excursions to the grove and a number of news stories about it.
4. Elsa Gilbertson, "The Early Houses of Staten Island," M.S. thesis (Columbia University, 1982), 16-19. See also pp. 60-68 for a discussion of roof-framing systems employed on Staten Island and the related development of the spring eave.
5. Despite the loss of the great majority of Staten Island's earliest dwellings, surviving structures still illustrate the various forms of spring eave construction. They include the following: the c. 1740 Guyon-Lake-Tysen House, a designated Landmark, at Richmondtown which preserves a good example of the gambrel roof/spring eave combination as does the 1765 Old Moravian Church in New Dorp. Instances of the characteristic early 19th-century single-pitched roof combined with a spring eave include the c.1810 Sylvanus Decker House, a designated Landmark, and "Beaver Cottage" of approximately the same date at 1807 Richmond Road.
6. Loring McMillan, "Staten Island Architecture, Part II," Staten Island Historian, 4 no. 3 (July, 1941), 20. See also: Gilbertson, 65. She notes that most often it was only one elevation of a house that was thus "protected."
7. The c.1840 5910 Amboy Road House, a designated Landmark, is a good example of the type. Like other vernacular versions of the Greek Revival style, it employs a slightly setback kitchen wing, a house plan characteristic of much earlier 19th-century residential design on Staten Island.
8. For example, the wood-clad c.1835 Gardiner-Tyler House, a designated Landmark, is a reduced and decoratively simplified version of the Caleb Ward House design. The Joseph H. Seguire House at 440 Seguire Avenue, also a designated Landmark, is an imposing but somewhat oddly proportioned and simplified version of a temple-fronted building.

9. A surviving north shore example of the type at 364 Van Duzer Street, a designated Landmark, employs a second level porch. Many were built along the shorefront in Mariners Harbor for merchants and captains active in the oyster trade but none survive. See, for example, Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, Staten Island and its People, (New York, 1930), vol. 2, opp. pp. 634, 638, for early 20th-century photographs of some of these dwellings. Survivors of the type are more numerous in the 19th-century villages of southern Staten Island -- Princes Bay, Pleasant Plains, Rossville and Huguenot. Tottenville retains a remarkable number of instances including the late 1840s William H. Rutan House immediately south of the Biddle House. Other examples are located at 76 Bentley Street, 145 Main Street, 750 Paige Avenue, 4927, 5390 and 5457 Arthur Kill Road.
10. Perhaps the cost of the double porches dictated the use of quadristyle porticoes which partially obscure the five bays rather than frame them as a hexastyle portico would have done.
11. The c.1820 Jacob Crocheron House (it was recently moved from 84 Woodrow Road to Richmondtown) is a gambrel-roofed dwelling with front and rear one-story tall, facade-wide porches covered by deep spring eaves. A much altered straight-gabled farm house (late 18th or early 19th century) on the grounds of Mount Loretto near the intersection of Hylan Boulevard and Sharrotts Road is still distinguished by its front and rear porches employing deep spring eaves.
12. Leng and Davis, Vol. III, 103.
13. A roadway once located approximately 100 feet south of today's Pittsville Avenue led westward from Pittsville Avenue to provide access to the W.H. Rutan residence and shipyard.

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 Henry Hogg Biddle House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Henry Hogg Biddle House, built in the late 1840s, combines in its design spring eave construction -- a technique widely used on Staten Island from the late 17th century on -- with a two-story tall Greek Revival columned portico; that it illustrates one of the most striking of the responses made by Staten Island builders to the high style Greek Revival residences built there by wealthy New York City merchants in the 1830s; that the Biddle House preserves an extremely rare, and possibly unique, instance on Staten Island and in New York City of double-height Greek Revival style porticoes used at the front and rear elevations of a structure, creating a dramatic and imposing effect; that the twin porticoes of the Biddle House are a response to its attractive elevated location and provide it with impressive facades whether seen and approached from the street or from the waterfront; that the setting of the Biddle House, which includes the long approach drive, fencing and plantings, enhances the character of the architecture; that the Biddle House design expresses the self-described status of its original owner as a "gentleman," and his position as important member of the immediate community of Unionville and the larger village of Tottenville; and that the Biddle House is a major monument of 19th-century vernacular architecture on Staten Island.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Henry Hogg Biddle House, 70 Satterlee Street, Borough of Staten Island, as a New York City Landmark, and designates the property consisting of Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7966, Lot 75 and the adjacent mapped roadbed of Pittsville Avenue extending to the northern boundary of Conference House Park (formerly Tax Map Block 7960, Lot 100, now Block 7857, Lot 100), as its Landmark Site.

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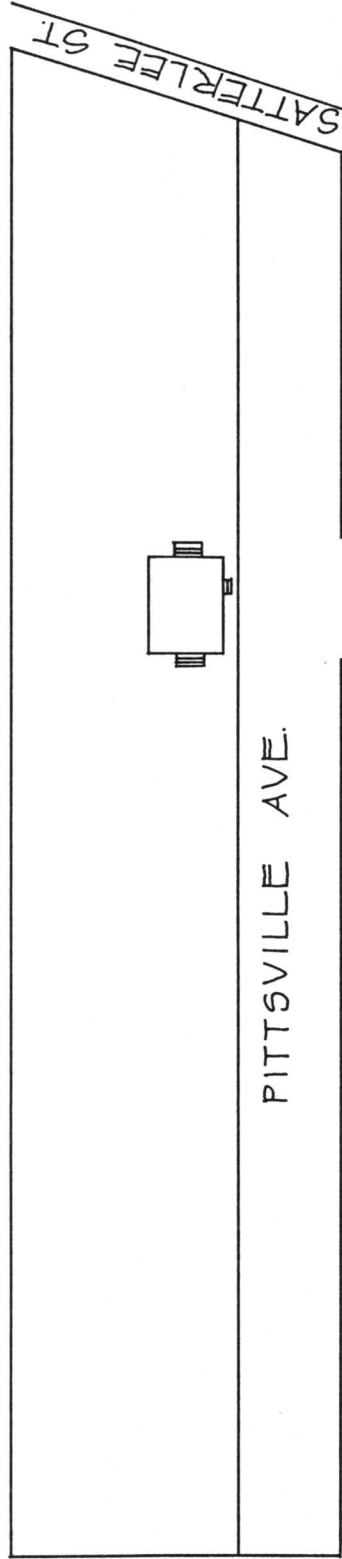
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U.S. PIERHEAD & BULKHEAD LINE



HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION
70 SATTERLEE STREET LP-1707 DESIGNATED MAY 1, 1990
STATEN ISLAND
LANDMARK SITE: TAX MAP BLOCK 7966, LOT 75 & THE ADJACENT
ROADBED OF PITTSVILLE AVENUE



HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE, c.1850
70 Satterlee Street
east elevation

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE, c.1850
view from southwest

Photo Credit: Landmarks Preservation
Commission date: 1960s



Photo Credit: Carl Forster

HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE c.1850
west elevation



HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE, c. 1850
doorway: east elevation

Photo credit
Carl Forster



HENRY HOGG BIDDLE HOUSE, c. 1850
top: north elevation
bottom: south elevation

Photo credit:
Carl Forster