

*The Tottenville Historical Society  
presents:*

## **TOTTENVILLE'S TERRA COTTA TRADITION**

**SATURDAY, MAY 6, 2006  
12:30 P.M.**

at the Magyar (Hungarian) Reformed Church  
19 Winant Place  
Charleston, Staten Island, NY

Arranged in cooperation with the Friends of Terra Cotta, Inc.



**Tottenville Historical Society**  
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## *The Atlantic Terra Cotta Company* (ATCC)

Glazed architectural terra cotta became the “wonder” material of the American building industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For more than three decades, the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, Tottenville, designed and manufactured architectural fabric and ornaments, sculpture, and garden pottery. Founded in 1897 by former craftsmen and officers of the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Co., Atlantic opened its doors in Tottenville in 1898. (This Perth Amboy company was the first to open in the East, in 1879, and remained in business the longest, until 1943.) By 1906, the Tottenville firm had grown from three to eight kilns, was employing more than 450 men, and was producing terra cotta for NYC’s skyline including the Flatiron Building, the Plaza Hotel, and even the first NYC subway stations.

Originally called the Atlantic Terra Cotta *Works*, in 1907 the Tottenville plant combined with the much larger Perth Amboy plant and the smaller Excelsior Company of Rocky Hill, NJ, and incorporated as the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company. The Tottenville plant was referred to as Plant No. 1; Perth Amboy became No. 2; and Rocky Hill was No. 3. Shortly afterwards, the Standard Terra Cotta Works in Perth Amboy was acquired and was known as Plant No. 4. The *Atlanta* Terra Cotta Co. in East Point, GA was also acquired, but was administered separately.

The establishment of the ATCC *in Tottenville* can be credited to the firm’s founders: De Forest Grant, William D. Frerichs, S.S. Whitehurst, and Charles U. Thrall. The latter three were residents of Tottenville and had all been connected with the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Co. The Tottenville Board of Trade, of which Frerichs presided, was instrumental in securing the Tottenville location. Why was Tottenville ideal? It was located only 20 miles from NYC by rail or water; it has easy access to the iron

and coal docks across the Sound, materials which are essential to the terra cotta industry; it was near the Perth Amboy plant and good sources of New Jersey clay found in Woodbridge, Perth Amboy, and New Brunswick; and Tottenville was a thriving community.

In the early 1930s, both the failure of the economy and new construction technologies contributed to the decline of the terra cotta industry. Around 1931, the closing of Plant No. 1 of the Atlantic Terra Cotta Co., Inc. marked the beginning of the end of the manufacture of locally made terra cotta. By 1932, the Rocky Hill and Atlanta firms had already closed their doors. The Perth Amboy plant remained in business until 1943.

Even today, you can still see the remains of a once great industry locally: the eagle over the entrance of PS 1, the façade of the Tottenville Masonic Temple, tombstones in Bethel Cemetery, urns on the grounds of the Staten Island Historical Society, and treasured remnant pieces in South Shore gardens and backyards.

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Many of this country's buildings are constructed of glazed architectural terra cotta and are in a state of serious deterioration and decay. New technology and methods of rehabilitation now hold promise for the restoration of these invaluable resources. That restoration work should equal the spirit, attention to detail, pride in workmanship and care which characterized the craftsmanship associated with this historic masonry material.

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The **Tottenville Historical Society** was founded in 2003. Its primary goal is to document and preserve the culture and history of Tottenville and vicinity, and to educate the public about local history through the Society's newsletters, programs, exhibitions and events.

We invite you to join this effort through membership support and by sharing information, so that our local history can be recorded for generations to come.

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Our guest speaker, **Susan Tunick**, is the President of The Friends of Terra Cotta and has published books and numerous articles on terra cotta and tiles. Her 1997 book, "Terra Cotta Skyline: New York's Architectural Ornament," has received several awards and provides an in-depth look at this subject.

**The Friends of Terra Cotta**, a national, non-profit organization, was founded 25 years ago to promote education and research in the preservation of architectural terra cotta and related ceramic materials. The organization seeks to educate the general public and construction industry professionals about architectural terra cotta's value and history as a building material. Recognizing the complexities of preserving architectural terra cotta, The Friends of Terra Cotta, provides information and expert resources to assist the process. Members receive quarterly mailings of pertinent, topical information, and access to additional in-depth publications.

<http://www.preserve.org/fotc/fotc.htm>

*Resources:*

*Made on Staten Island: Agriculture, Industry, and Suburban Living in the City, 1988, Charles L. Sachs*

*The Staten Island Historian, Volume XXXI, April-June 1974, Number 18, publication of the Staten Island Historical Society*

With special thanks to the Staten Island Historical Society.