

Lefferts House
Prospect Park, Brooklyn
Kings County, New York

HABS No. NY-511

HABS
N.Y.,
24-640K,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. NY-5

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HABS
N.Y.,
24-BROK,

2 -

"THE LEFFERTS HOMESTEAD"

Brooklyn, Kings County, New York

Owner or Custodian

The City of New York. Leased to the Fort Greene Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, under the supervision of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, Department of Museums.

Date of Erection

Original house--latter part of the 17th century.

Rebuilt after fire of 1776, in 1777.

Architect

Unknown.

Builder

Original house--Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout, the elder.

Present house--Pieter Lefferts.

Present Condition

Fair. Repair work being done on house at present time.

Number of Stories

One and one half.

Materials of Construction

Masonry foundation, wood floors, wood walls, shingle sides and roof. Wood dormers, porch and columns added and alterations made in the interior in 1835, but no changes were made when moved in 1917.

Other Existing Records

None.

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Additional Data

Location and early history:

This house is located near the Empire Boulevard entrance to Prospect Park. Previous to 1918 it was located at 563 Flatbush Avenue, on the west side of the street, between Midwood and Maple Streets. Originally, it was on a tract of land which was purchased from the Indians by the early Dutch settlers in the early part of the 17th century.

In 1634 this plot became part of a village which the Dutch called Midwout or Middle Woods, and now is known as Flatbush.

In 1660 Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout, the elder, came to America from Holland and received this parcel of land from the Dutch governor, Peter Stuyvesant.

Erection of First House

Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout erected the original house some time after his arrival here and it may be definitely assumed as the latter part of the 17th century.

The Dutch surrendered the New Netherlands to the English in 1664 and it became known as the Province of New York. The terms of the surrender provided respect of property rights of the Dutch settlers residing there, and since the land belonging to Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout was effected, a confirmation of the patent was granted

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(Cont'd.) to him by the English governor, Colonel Thomas Dongan. This patent included the whole town, including Midwout or Flatbush and was executed on the 12th of November, 1685. After the death of Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout, the elder, the house and land passed into the hands of his son, Lefferts Pietersen van Hagewout. He held it until 1717 when he conveyed the homestead to his son Jan or John for a consideration of 1400 pounds.

Jan or John Lefferts, great grandson of the first settler, owned and lived in the house until August 27, 1776, when it was accidentally or by intent destroyed by fire during the Battle of Long Island. The fire was set by American riflemen, who were ordered to fire the crops in order to prevent the supplies of grain from falling into the hands of the British. Jan or John Lefferts died shortly after the fire, his death recorded as October, 1776.

The property then passed into the hands of his son Pieter Lefferts, First Lieutenant of the Brooklyn Militia during the Revolution. Later he was a member of the Convention to adopt the Constitution at Poughkeepsie on June 27, 1788, State Senator in 1791, and Judge of the Court of Sessions and Common Pleas.

Date of Erection of Present Structure

Using the old foundation, timbers and unburned portions of the original house, Pieter Lefferts and a few skilled carpenters built the present homestead in 1777. Judging from the analogy of other

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(Cont'd.) Dutch houses of the period and the fact that the Dutch were exceedingly conservative, it shall probably not be far from right in assuming that the new homestead followed closely the pattern of the original. The homestead has remained in the possession of the Lefferts family until 1918, when it was presented to the City of New York to serve as a museum. During this year it was moved from its original site at 563 Flatbush Avenue to Prospect Park at an expense of \$16,000. At present it belongs to the City of New York and is leased to the Fort Greene Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, who maintain it under the supervision of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, Department of Museums. It is being used as a museum at present and is occupied by a caretaker employed by the Department of Parks.

Present Condition

The present condition of the house is fair, but restoration and repairs are being made on the structure.

Materials of Construction, Type, etc.

The house is of Dutch type, derived and developed from the original Dutch style so prevalent on Long Island and in New Jersey. Earlier examples by the Dutch settlers may be studied in the drawings of the Wyckoff house, H.A.B.S. survey No. NY4-28, 5902 Canarsie Lane, Brooklyn, N.Y. The Schenck House, H.A.B.S. survey NY513, formerly

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(Cont'd.) in Canarsie Park, Brooklyn, N. Y., is another very early example. The former of these two houses was built in 1664 of materials brought from Holland. The Schenck house was built about 1670. The Lefferts Homestead as it stands today represents a type as developed in this locality in the 18th century. It was considered of historic importance and fine enough example of type by the City of New York to preserve and place in Prospect Park. It was thus thought that whereas it was in no more immediate danger of being destroyed than any well cared for wooden building, if it was important enough to preserve for all time it would be wise to survey it carefully for national records to be placed in the Congressional Library.

Just how much of this building was destroyed by the fire of 1776 during the Battle of Long Island is of course unknown. It may be safe to assume that there was left the timbers, the general form of the building and much detail. It was probably quite carefully restored in 1777 and for years was outstanding in the Flatbush section.

Attention is called to the graceful lines of the whole structure, especially the gambrel roof. These start from the ridges in short easy top pitches, lead down and gracefully ease out to receive the cornice mouldings over the columns at the front and rear. The gable roof lines of the addition are not without grace

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(Cont'd.)

and dignity. The walls of the house are of wood covered with wide shingle. The roof is of modern wood shingle.

The main front door and entrance is of great dignity and beauty. This is an exceedingly fine type, perhaps one of the best in this locality, of a late 18th century side light transomed doorway. Casts were made during this survey of the fan ornament and other detail of the exterior of this doorway. It would have been interesting to have been able to have recorded the small lead ornaments at the junctions of the metal, not lead, sash bars of the side lights and transom. They were not distinct enough for this. This doorway surely remains one of grace and exceeding refinement, indicating the love of detail and exquisite workmanship of the 18th century.

The plan of the house is simple and direct. The stairs are of special note, particularly the hand-rail, stair ends and the tread arrangement between the landings. The mantels are of uncertain date, all are similar but executed in a careful workmanlike manner.

It might be well to mention that the building at present contains many fine examples of 18th century furniture, well selected, placed and cared for. On the whole it seems a most ideal way to preserve and care for an old and historical building.

In 1835 the house was somewhat remodeled--wood dormers were added, the columns placed on the porches and much of the interior was "restored". When the house was moved in 1917 there was much discussion

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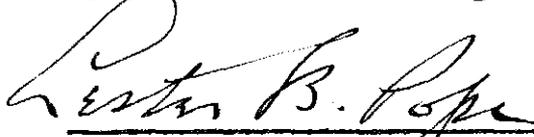
about removing these "changes" and trying to restore the building to what would seem to be a more truthful historic appearance. A committee, much aided by public opinion, decided to let the building remain as it had been existing for years at 563 Flatbush Avenue, not far from where it now stands. Surely it now occupies a choice site, gracefully carrying on the dignity of its years and the memory of the lives and fine work of the men of early times in this section.

Sources Consulted

1. "Manor Houses and Historic Homes of Long Island and Staten Island", H. D. Eberlein.
2. "History of the County of Kings and City of Brooklyn", Henry Stiles.
3. "The History of the Town of Flatbush in Kings County", edited in 1842 and 1884, by Thomas M. Strong, M.D.
4. "The Eagle and Brooklyn", Henry W. B. Howard.


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