

ROCKLAND  
Fairmount Park (East Park)  
Mount Pleasant Drive  
Philadelphia  
~~Montgomery County~~  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6055

HABS  
PA  
51-PHILA,  
755-

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: Mount Pleasant Drive, Fairmount Park (East Park), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Rockland, erected ca. 1810, is an excellent example of a Federal style house built by skilled, local carpenters and masons, and exhibiting many similarities to earlier country houses built along the Schuylkill River. The elliptical staircase possesses classic Adamesque details and is one of the few of its type that survives in the Philadelphia area.

Description: Rockland is a two-and-one-half story, three-bay, dwelling which is set on a hill facing south into Fairmount Park and overlooking the Schuylkill River to the north. It is a Federal-style house constructed of rubble stone masonry and covered with stucco scored to emulate cut stone. Rockland has a hipped roof with six dormers and a full basement. The basement, which is exposed on the east, west and north facades due to the sloping grade, has several entrances and windows. The building's principal entrance is located in the center of the five-bay south facade. It features a neoclassical, semi-circular portico with tapered, fluted, Doric columns and is entered through paneled double doors with a fanlight above. On the second floor, above the main entrance, is a modified Palladian window consisting of a tripartite window with an elliptical wooden arch.

All of Rockland's windows are aligned horizontally and vertically. Those on the first floor are large six-over-nine light double-hung sash with plain wood sills and lintels. On the second floor, all windows are six-over-six light double-hung sash also with plain wood sills and lintels. Originally, all of the windows (except those in the dormers) had louvered shutters. The west facade has three symmetrically arranged windows on each floor. The east facade also has three windows on each floor, however, they are not symmetrically arranged due to a second chimney located between the central and north bays. The north facade features a full-width, one-story, raised porch with a simple balustrade and fluted, tapered, Doric columns similar to those on the front portico. The north facade also has four symmetrically placed windows on each floor. Those on the first floor are full-length sliding windows designed to provide access from the north parlor to the rear porch. The arched-top dormers all have six-over-six light double-hung sash. There are three interior chimneys; one on the west facade and two on the east facade. The brick stacks rise well above the roofline. The hipped roof is covered with wood shingles on the slopes and built-up roofing on the flat deck. The deck was originally enclosed by a balustrade.

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The first floor plan of Rockland consists of a stair hall and two rooms, while the second and third floors consist of a stair hall and three bedrooms. The second floor also contains a modern bath. On the first floor, the stair hall occupies the center and southwest portion of the building. It features an elegant elliptical staircase which rises from the first through the third floors. Wainscot paneling frames the staircase and vine brackets decorate each riser. A balustrade with square posts winds up the three flights of stairs. A six-paneled wood door leading to the basement is located in the stair hall below the curve of the staircase. The stair hall contains two windows; one along the south wall and one along the west wall. Like all of the windows on the first floor, they are bordered by wainscot paneling.

The east room on the first floor likely served as a small parlor. It has two windows; one on the south wall and one on the east wall. The east wall also contains a fireplace with a marble mantel. The ceiling features applied decorative plaster molding in a pattern of broad ribbed bands at the cornice and an inset rectangle of thinner bands with rosettes at the corner. This room was altered in the twentieth century to serve as a kitchen. The original kitchen was located in the basement.

The rear parlor extends along the entire north wall of the dwelling. It is heated by two fireplaces; one along the west wall and one along the east wall. Both fireplaces are surrounded by marble mantels with ribbed molding and corner rosettes. The fireplaces both contain rare cast-iron reflecting plates marked with the "Atsion Furnace" Company stamp. The north parlor is lit by eight windows; two along the east and west walls and four along the north walls. As mentioned previously, the full-length windows along the west wall were designed to provide access to the rear porch. This type of window was widely used before French doors became popular. The ceiling features an elliptical plaster ceiling medallion with a feather and flower design and decorative plaster banding along the cornice similar to that in the east room.

The second floor stair hall is lit by the modified Palladian window and contains doors leading into three bedrooms and a bath. The east bedroom has two windows, and, like all of the windows on the second floor, they have built-in paneled shutters. The east bedroom also contains a closet and a fireplace with a wood mantel of late Federal design. The northeast and northwest bedrooms are connected by a paneled wood door and they are virtually mirror images, each containing four windows and a fireplace surrounded by a wooden mantel. The second floor also has a narrow room next to the stair hall. It is currently used as a bath, however, it is likely that this room did not originally exist and instead was part of the stair hall.

The third floor contains a stair hall and three bedrooms. It is similar in plan to the second floor, but it does not contain a bath. The outer bedroom walls are sloped, reflecting the pitch of the hipped roof. The rooms are all lit by dormers and there are ladder stairs in the hall leading to the roof. The rooms on this floor are quite plain and likely were used by servants and/or children.

Nearly all of the original features of the house remain. Especially noteworthy are the elliptical staircase, the "Atsion Furnace" reflecting plates, and the large north parlor that connects the house and the porch, providing wonderful vistas of the Schukill River.

History: Rockland was built ca. 1810 for George Thomson on twenty-six acres adjacent to Mount Pleasant that he bought in 1809 from General Jonathan Williams for \$3000. Thomson, a Philadelphia merchant, used the house as a summer residence. In 1815, he sold the property and the house he had named "Rockland" to Isaac C. Jones, another Philadelphia merchant, for \$25,000. In 1870, Isaac Jones, Jr. sold the estate to the City of Philadelphia for \$72,000. This was a considerable sum in 1870, however, it reflected Rockland's fine architecture and desirable location overlooking the Schukill River. At this time, the estate also included a tenant house, a stone barn, a frame barn, an ice house and a garden enclosed by an elliptical drive in the east lawn just beyond the existing iron fence.

The design of Rockland is a classic example of a Federal, or Adams, style house. Its similarity to several earlier country homes built along the Schukill River, such as the Cliffs (ca. 1753), Laurel Hill (ca. 1767 with later additions), Woodford (ca. 1756, second floor 1771) and Ormiston (ca. 1798), illustrates the importance the local carpenters and masons placed on conventional architectural designs and details. Some of the traditional Adamesque elements featured at Rockland include the fanlight with patterned tracery at the entrance, a modified Palladian window centered above the entrance, doors with flat molding profiles, and decorative plasterwork of ribbed bands and corner rosettes. As was the general custom, the first floor is ornamented more elaborately than the upper floors, since entertaining was relegated to the first floor. For example, the second floor lacks wainscot paneling at the windows, wood mantels are used instead of marble mantels, and there is no decorative plasterwork on the ceiling. The north parlor, which is often described as a ballroom, may have been used for that purpose by the original owner, George Thomson. The Jones family, however, were Quakers and therefore it is unlikely that they used it for dancing. It was probably used for both dining and entertaining.

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Rockland is one of several historic mansions located in Fairmount Park. It is owned by the City of Philadelphia, but is currently vacant. The house is structurally sound but is in need of some repairs and painting.

Sources:

Athenaeum: One drawing of Rockland ca. 1871.

Fairmount Park Historic Properties Assessment: Rockland.  
November 1987. This report provided the date of  
construction and much of the history included in this HABS  
form.

Fairmount Park Commission files. Included in their files is a  
1868 topographical map noting the outbuildings.

Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust , Inc., files.

Kennedy, David J. Watercolor of Rockland ca. 1870. Located at  
the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Historian: Janet G. Blutstein, HABS Historian, 1994.

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