

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 29, 2004, Designation List 355
LP-2158

Avenue H Station House, 802 East 16th Street (aka 1518-1524 Avenue H), Brooklyn.
Built 1906.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6600, Lot 119-431 in part,
consisting of the land on which the building is situated.

On June 15, 2004, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the exterior of the Avenue H Station House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were ten speakers in favor of designation including City Councilman Simcha Felder representing the 44th District, a representative of State Assemblymember James F. Brennan, a representative of Community Board 14, the two co-Presidents of the Fiske Terrace Association, the Brooklyn Borough Historian, a representative of the Midwood Park Home Owners Association and a representative of the Historic Districts Council. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

Summary

The Avenue H station on the BMT line, originally the Brooklyn, Flatbush & Coney Island Railroad, built in 1906, is the city's only shingled wooden cottage turned transit station house. Often compared to a country train stop, it originally served as a real estate sales office for developer Thomas Benton Ackerson to sell property in the adjacent neighborhood of Fiske Terrace, an early twentieth century example of planned suburban development. The structure, with a hipped and flared roof and wraparound porch, evokes in miniature the area's Colonial Revival and Queen Anne houses. After nearly a century of commuter traffic, the Avenue H station remains in service and retains much historic fabric, from a corbelled chimney to peeled-log porch columns. It is one of a very small number of wood-frame station houses surviving in the modern subway system, the only station adapted from a structure built for another function, and the only surviving station from Brooklyn's once-extensive network of surface train lines, which had originally attracted Ackerson and numerous other developers to the area¹.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Railroads and the Development of Flatbush

As early as the 1630s, Dutch colonists settled in what is now Flatbush, building small, gambrel-roofed farmhouses. The area remained predominantly agricultural until the 1830s, when an enterprising Flatbush resident named Smith Birdsall opened a stage line connecting Flatbush and Brooklyn, the first transit link between the communities. Along the path of this horse-drawn service, and similar lines established in the 1850s and 1860s, developers started laying out new streets with building lots, on which rose vernacular gable-roofed houses. The construction of Prospect Park, begun in 1866, spurred further development and attracted what a local newspaper in 1873 dubbed “pleasure seekers.”²

These visitors also headed deeper into Kings County, to the new casinos, racetracks, and other attractions at Brighton Beach. To serve the resorts’ customers, private rail-line operators created half a dozen steam-locomotive excursion lines, including the Brooklyn, Flatbush & Coney Island Railroad (B.F.&C.I.). The B.F.&C.I., which opened in 1878, had one major advantage over its competitors. At its terminus, the railroad’s owners built the 275-room Hotel Brighton, a French Second Empire folly (demolished in the 1920s), which was eventually expanded to some 600 rooms.³

Because of the area’s extensive network of excursion lines, as well as the attractive new park and the 1883 opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, Flatbush’s potential for development as a leafy “streetcar suburb” became clear. To keep its growth orderly, the Legislature laid out a street grid for all of Kings County in 1869. By the 1880s, developers were creating clusters of similar-looking freestanding houses along the new grid, and providing infrastructure such as water hookups, paved streets, and landscaping. Among those well-planned early subdivisions were Tennis Court (begun in 1886), Prospect Park South (begun in 1899), and Ditmas Park (begun in 1902).⁴

Thomas Benton Ackerson and Fiske Terrace

Thomas Benton “T.B.” Ackerson, formerly a worker at the Knickerbocker Ice Company, started developing blocks of freestanding homes around Flatbush in the 1890s⁵ In 1898, Ackerson founded the T.B. Ackerson Company.⁶ He partnered with his three brothers, all of whom went by their initials: P.T., C.W., and H.W.⁷ Around Beverley Road between East 17th and East 19th Streets, the company built speculative houses in clusters called Beverley Square East and Beverley Square West, never repeating the same designs.⁸ On June 8, 1905, T.B. paid \$285,000 to George P. and Elizabeth Fiske for a Flatbush estate with a mansion (since demolished) called Fiske Terrace.⁹ A few months before T.B. officially closed the deal, the *New York Times* reported on his planned redevelopment of Fiske Terrace: “This land, which is at the highest elevation between Prospect Park and the ocean, is located at the junction of the Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach Railroads, both of which will probably be used in connection with the new subways and bridges in affording quick transit to Manhattan.”¹⁰

The Fiske Terrace site, bounded by the BMT line (west), the LIRR tracks (south), Ocean Avenue (East), and an ell of Irvington Place and Glenwood Road (north), was a forested slope when Ackerson purchased it.¹¹ According to a 1907 brochure for the development, the company so swiftly transformed the land “from a wooded hilltop to a high class developed Suburban Home Site” that the project would “go down in history as being the most rapidly developed of its kind on record.”¹²

The 60-page pamphlet emphasized Ackerson’s superiority over the typical “land boomer, or lot exploiter” of the era. That is, he did not simply provide raw lots with minimal utility links. He graded wide boulevards with sidewalks, planted medians, and made sure to “lay sewer, water and gas mains, electric and telephone conduits in the streets and into the lots up to the house lines.” Ackerson, as the *Times* had predicted, touted the development’s proximity to public transportation (automobiles were then still reserved for the very wealthy). Half a dozen photos in the brochure show adjacent trolley or rail lines.¹³

Ackerson’s sales offices were low-key, too. At the Beverley Squares and at a row of houses on Coney Island Avenue at 12th Street, the brokers operated in one-and-a-half storey structures with pyramidal roofs, gabled dormers, flared eaves, and deep roof overhangs.¹⁴ Armed with the company’s effusive brochures, the brokers were apparently highly effective. “Good Demand for Houses in Fiske Terrace,” the

Times reported in July 1908.¹⁵ Of the complex's 150 houses (some built by other developers including C. F. Bond and J. R. Corbin), "all but one sold before completion."¹⁶

T.B. Ackerson and his brothers went on to build homes in New Jersey and to create a Long Island village from scratch: Brightwaters, on 1,700 acres near Bay Shore. The company filled swamps there and dug a new canal and lake (Nosrekca Lake—pronounced noce-REE-kuh; that is, Ackerson spelled backwards). By the 1920s, the overextended company was bankrupt. Its circa-1908 sales office at Brightwaters still stands and has remained in family hands, operated by Bartlett Ackerson, a grandson of T.B.'s brother H.W.¹⁷

Fiske Terrace's Sales Office

Fiske Terrace's brochure does not depict the sales office onsite—it may not have been completed in time for publication.¹⁸ The building does appear in a 1906 photo¹⁹ bearing a sign for Fiske Terrace above its porch and the address of Ackerson's headquarters, 140 Nassau Street. Drawings for the structure, dated June 23, 1905, were given in 2002 by the Ackerson family to the Brooklyn Borough Historian's office. The draftsman, with the initials R.H.B., specified peeled-log posts, rough log slices as siding, a fieldstone chimney with a pair of ceramic flues, and 6/1 sash. Inside were to be three offices and a reception room, the latter warmed by a brick fireplace with a stone mantel trimmed in colored-tile insets and stone corbels. Well-crafted rusticity was clearly the desired impression. Doors were to have "Barn door hinges & hardware," the designer wrote, and the walls should be finished in "Rough cast plaster."

The Brighton Line Station House

Within approximately a year of its opening, the building had outlived its function as a sales office. By the time Ackerson had acquired the property, the B.F.&C.I. had been electrified, linked to the Fulton Street Elevated, extended over the Brooklyn Bridge to Park Row in Manhattan, and bought out by the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company, the BRT in 1899. The station stop had been a gabled building, a structure which Ackerson's brochure depicted alongside a horse-drawn carriage and chided for "its primitive condition."²⁰ On August 23, 1907, the former real estate office debuted as a transit station.²¹ The station is remarkable both for its porch-ringed cottage and for the dramatic topographical transition that trains make there. North of Avenue H, wealthy Flatbush homeowners fought in the early 1900s to have the line dug below grade. South of Avenue H, trains run on an elevated embankment that stretches to the Brighton Beach terminus.²²

From 1922-1940 this was part of the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation, or BMT.²³ In 1940 this line together with the Interborough Rapid Transit were merged with the municipally owned Independent subway to form the city's public transportation system. Now run by the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the Avenue H station house serves the Brighton line and is a stop on the Q train. Each weekday, 2,522 riders stream through Avenue H's turnstiles, and 790,631 passengers use the station annually.²⁴

Description

The Avenue H Station House is a one-story wood-frame building clad in wood shingles with a hipped pyramidal roof supported by a wide portico of historic chamfered wood posts that form a wraparound porch, which originally had supports of peeled-log columns. Originally freestanding, the station house now abuts a brick apartment building on its south side. This façade remains partly exposed, and visitors allowed through the MTA's locked gates there will find two peeled-log columns still supporting the porch (one painted white, the other a rustic brown). The roof is covered in nonhistoric asphalt shingles and has a central corbelled yellow brick chimney. The undersides of the extended eaves are clad in tongue-and-groove boards each about two inches wide, a nonhistoric gutter has been added to the eaves. At the intersections of the walls and porch eaves, a band of simple ogee molding encircles the building.

Avenue H façade the north (Avenue H) façade is four bays wide and consists of two historic wood and glass paneled doors and a double window of four over one lights. Three nonhistoric light fixtures are located above the two doors and the westernmost bay. A nonhistoric sign identifying the station is located between the two doors. The portico is supported by six wood posts, the second from the west

appears to be a replacement, the fourth from the west has a metal pipe attached to it. The posts of the portico rest on a raised concrete platform are two doors and two windows, with square cap moldings.

East 16th Street façade: The façade is four bays wide and consists from north to south of two historic wood and glass paneled doors, a tripartite storefront with a central glass door flanked by store windows, and a door with a roll-down gate. Four nonhistoric lights are attached to the top of the wall, a nonhistoric sign identifying the station is above the doors and another nonhistoric metro card sign is located to the north of the northernmost door. The portico has seven posts, the northernmost and the third from the north appear to be replacement posts.

On the west (train-track) façade are three turnstile openings and a service gateway, the latter with ghosts of hinges on its simple wooden surround, a large metal utility box and modern metal piping affixed to the eaves. The portico consists of seven posts, the second, fourth and fifth from the north are metal paneled subway posts.

Report prepared by
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NOTES

¹Matus, Paul "The Little Station in the Woods," *The Third Rail*, December 1999 and email communication between author and Matus. 26 March 2004.

² Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Ditmas Park Historic District Designation Report, LP-1236* (New York: City of New York, 1981).

³ Jackson, Kenneth T. and John B. Manbeck, editors, *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 122; Schweiger, Ron, Brooklyn Borough Historian. Personal interview, 19 March 2004.

⁴ Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Ditmas Park Historic District Designation Report*.

⁵ . "Once he had earned a little money at the ice company, he asked his boss what to spend it on, and the answer was, 'real estate.'" Schweiger, interview 19 March 2004.

⁶ Gunnison, Herbert F. ed. *The Flatbush of To-Day* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: All Souls Church, 1908), 100.

⁷ Ackerson, Bartlett. Personal interview. 20 March 2004.

⁸ "Model Flatbush Houses," *Brooklyn Eagle*, (12 July 1902), 11.

⁹ Schweiger, interview 19 March 2004.

¹⁰ "To Develop Flatbush Property." *New York Times* (19 March 1905), 20.

¹¹ Fiske Terrace Association. *Historic Fiske Terrace, 1900 – 2000, Landmarks Project*. Unpublished essay, 2000, n. p.

¹² T.B. Ackerson Co. *Suburban Development: Fiske Terrace, Transformed from Woods Into City in 18 Months*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: T.B. Ackerson Co., 1907), 33, 43, 44.

¹³ Ackerson Co., 3, 8, 12.

¹⁴ Ackerson Co., 31, 33.

¹⁵ "Flatbush Dwellings Sold," *New York Times* (19 July 1908), 8.

¹⁶ *Historic Fiske Terrace*.

¹⁷ Ackerson, interview 20 March 2004.

¹⁸ Ackerson Co., 41.

¹⁹ Collection of Paul Matus.

²⁰ Ackerson Co., 40.

²¹ "BMT Brighton: Avenue H," Online essay, 2004. < <http://www.nycsubway.org/bmt/brighton/bmt-brighton-h.html>; John Fink, "railways" in Kenneth T. Jackson, editor *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 982, 984.

²² Schweiger, interview 19 March 2004.

²³ Schweiger, interview 19 March 2004.

²⁴ Markowitz, Marty, Brooklyn Borough President. Letter to Robert B. Tierney, Chairman, Landmarks Preservation Commission. 11 Dec. 2003.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the exterior of the Avenue H Station House has a special character, and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Avenue H Station House was built in 1906, and is the city's only shingled wooden cottage turned transit station house; that it originally served as a sales office for the adjacent neighborhood of Fiske Terrace which is an early 20th century example of planned suburban development in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn; that the station house and the Fiske Terrace neighborhood were developed by Thomas Benton Ackerson, a significant developer of the Flatbush neighborhood; that the hipped pyramidal roof and wraparound portico of the station house evoke the Colonial Revival and Queen Anne style houses of Fiske Terrace; that is one of a few wood-frame station houses surviving in the modern subway system, and that it is the only station adapted from a structure built for another function, and that it is the only surviving station from Brooklyn's once-extensive network of surface train lines, which originally attracted developers to Flatbush.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 designated as a Landmark the exterior of the Avenue H Station House, 802 East 16th Street (aka 1518-1524 Avenue H), and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6699, Lot 119-431 in part, consisting of the land on which the building is situated as its Landmark Site.



Avenue H Station House
802 East 16th Street
Photo: Carl Forster



Avenue H Station House
Avenue H Façade
Photo: Carl Forster, 2004



Avenue H Station House
East 16th Street Facade
Photo: Carl Forster, 2004



Avenue H Station House
Avenue H Detail
Photo: Carl Forster, 2004



Avenue H Station House
Chimney Detail
Photo: Carl Forster, 2004



Avenue H Station House
802 East 16th Street (aka 1518-1524 Avenue H), Brooklyn
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6600, Lot 119-431
Source: Sanborn Brooklyn Land Book, volume 13 plate 38

