

The Old-House Revival Comes to Staten Island

By ROBERTA R. GRATZ
When Joseph and Randi bought their 1835 Greek Revival house on Staten Island, they never dreamed that they were the beginning of a trend.

They had lived in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone apartment in the mid-1960s early in their marriage and had wanted a brownstone of their own. The renovation movement, by then, was al-

ready underway and they discovered that ready-to-restore houses in Brooklyn's brownstone belt along Prospect Av., were already out of their price range.

A New World

An exploratory ferry ride, prompted partially by curiosity and partially by a determination to find something inexpensive, opened a whole new world to the Sinis. Now, two years after spending \$50,000 for their long-ogled 16-room wood frame house with its unpainted walls, broken balconies and peeling corinthian columns, the Sinis are discovering that they have joined one of the city's newest home-buying frontiers.

In the process, they have found themselves part of the city's growing preservation movement. The Landmarks Commission, at its July public hearing, considered for designation the Sinis' house at 350 Van Duzer St. in Stapleton along with a similar but better preserved house at 364 Van Duzer. Both houses are the last remaining of their kind on that street, which reportedly was lined with similar structures a century ago.

They were nominated for landmarks designation, to the Sinis' surprise, by Loring McMillen, a preservation consultant and director of the Richmondtown Restoration, who told the July

commission hearing: "The importance of these two houses is that they are important to and were developed on Staten Island. Their style is unique to the island and is not to be found elsewhere, and they are two fine examples of the several which still exist."

Designation Expected

Designation is expected from the commission in the near future.

The Van Duzer St. houses are considered part of Stapleton, an area only 10 or 15 minutes by car from the ferry. Stapleton boasts some of the island's more fashionable homes but, Joseph Sinis points out with a laugh, "we're really on the fringe."

The area, which has a wide variety of 19th century architecture, also has some spectacular hillside views of the water. Always a commuter community, many of its surviving houses were built by businessmen and merchants who traveled to the commercial center of Manhattan even a century ago.

With the same spirit, energy and limited renovation know-how that marked the brownstone revival neighborhoods in the 1950s, families like the Sinis are committing their limited funds to the neglected old houses the setting out on the long road of do-it-yourself renovation.

"The nice thing about these new buyers," notes Loring McMillen, "is that they want to restore the outside to their original appearance."

Born in Brooklyn

Joseph Sinis, 31, Brooklyn-born and raised, is a writer for Fairchild Publications. Randi, 30, Virginia-born, is an elementary school art teacher in a nearby public school. They have a son Joseph, 7. Neither Joseph nor Randi had a longstanding interest in old houses before they both level seeking junk and antique shop bargains.

The house is now filled with such items as an old brass bed, a round oak table, a wall clock with hand-painted face, a 6-foot-wide roll-top desk and wide assortment of colored glass telephone insulators.

Randi, who has a masters' degree in fine arts, started putting over New York architectural history books for clues on what their house might have looked like. She also searched the hall of records and life insurance company papers to piece together the house's history. Its first owner, she found, was Daniel Van Duzer, a brother-in-law of Cornelius Vanderbilt who, like Frederick Law Olmstead, at one time owned a Staten Island farm, and whose family name the street bears.

Ghost Stories

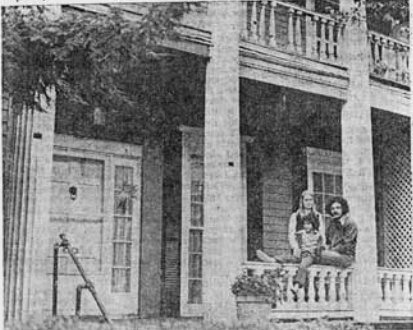
More recently, the house was owned by a prominent island doctor and amidst all the little reports from longtime area residents, there are always tales of ghosts. "With all the dark nooks and crannies," Randi says with a laugh, "we half-expected these stories to be true."

So far the Sinis have restored four corinthian columns, replaced the front window shutters, restored

the front porch, scraped floors, and stripped the carved wood stair railings. Some of the tasks seemed endless but nothing has cooled their determination to complete the restoration job.

The prospect of landmark designation has been an added incentive. "We never considered that possibility before we bought the house," says Randi, "but now that it's probably coming we're delighted. It makes our staying all the more worthwhile."

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Joseph and Randi Sinis with their son, Joseph, on the porch of their 1835 house in Staten Island. Their restoration of the house began a trend now being recognized by the Landmarks Commission. Story on Page 10. Photo by Fran Leonard