

Last-Ditch Effort to Save State's Oldest House

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

It is the oldest house in the state and may be the oldest woodframe dwelling in the country. It became the city's first officially designated landmark in 1965.

And for more than 20 years, scores of people have been seeking its restoration. For 10 years, that restoration has been promised.

Yet, the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House, a Dutch colonial farmhouse dating from 1637 or 1640, fared better during wars and natural disasters than it has under the benign neglect of recent bureaucratic delays.

The dilapidated but stubbornly sturdy two-chimney cottage, with its sloped roof, hand-hewn oak timbers and rounded shingles is decidedly a pathetic sight—boarded up and empty—at the corner of Clarendon Rd. and Ralph Av. in the East Flatbush-Flatlands area of Brooklyn.

A lot of imagination is required to share its promoters' vision of a restored monument to American history.

Those partisans, including neighborhood school children and Wyckoff descendants around the country, fear that if the Board of Estimate doesn't give final approval for restoration work this week, the historic dwelling will no longer be salvagable.

Last month, the board postponed until Thursday approval of a complicated plan which includes use of \$825,000 in federal funds for restoration of the house and partial acquisition of the surrounding two-acres for a proposed park.

There have been more "excuses for delay" over the years than the East Flatbush community can "tolerate," said Moses A. Lerman, vice chairman of Community Board Nine and chairman of

its committee that has been working to preserve the homestead for more years than they can count.

East Flatbush is an integrated community of predominately small homes undergoing rapid change and trying to preserve itself, one observer noted. "But whatever divisions there are, they all agree on this," the observer said. "It represents the community stability they are striving to maintain."

"It is a unifying symbol for us," Lerman said. "It is our most enduring asset. High school kids cleaned out the surrounding junk yard, helped excavate land around it and sifted every ounce of dirt for artifacts. They want it preserved and made into the museum and park they were promised years ago."

The most recent city delay was reportedly due to objections from the Parks Dept. and the Budget Bureau over

the financial burden the city would have to maintain the completed project.

But William S. Wyckoff of Stroudsburg, Pa., speaking for the Wyckoff Family Assn., has assured city officials that the far-flung descendants of the first Wyckoff would assist the city financially in maintaining the museum and park.

"There is great family pride in its history and relationship to New York City," Wyckoff said. In fact, they have been offering the city maintenance money for years.

Pieter Claesen Wyckoff was a town magistrate under Peter Stuyvesant and the name Wyckoff, in Dutch, means magistrate. He had 10 children to whom the more than 1000 direct descendants trace their origin. The Wyckoff Family Assn. was formed in 1937 at the 300th anniversary of their

forebears' arrival in New Amersfoort (now the Flatlands), and they purchased the house in 1959 for \$39,000.

They donated the house to the city in 1970. In an elaborate on-site ceremony accepting the deed, then-Mayor Lindsay said: "To let the oldest building in New York deteriorate would be unconscionable. To lose it through neglect would be tragic. It is part of the living tradition of New York City and the heritage of the nation."

Since then, a McDonald's hamburger stand and a partially constructed nursing home have become Wyckoff House neighbors. Over the years the house has withstood the disapproval of Robert Moses, been rescued from the bulldozers in a city street-widening project and saved from demolition for a state-financed high-rise

apartment project, with the community each time rising fiercely to its defense. Two years ago when planning boards were told by the city to list their priorities for capital budget and CDA funds, East Flatbush placed the Wyckoff house first.

"Everyone's always trying to strangle the project," says Lerman, "and the fact is that it is federal money that would save it and not a cent from the city."

Oil Refinery Blast Kills Four in France

ST. NAZAIRE, France — Four men were killed when an explosion ripped through an oven at a large oil refinery near this French Atlantic port yesterday.

Two persons were seriously injured in the blast, which was the result of a pipeline collapsing on the oven.

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