

Stafford “Osborn” House



DESIGNATION REPORT

Stafford “Osborn” House

LOCATION

Borough of the Bronx
95 Pell Place, City Island

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

As a remarkably intact Sears “mail-order” house on City Island, the Stafford “Osborn” House represents an important period of technological and social innovation in the history of American housing, and reflects the pattern of suburban-style residential development that occurred citywide during the early 20th century.



The Osborn, Sears Advertisement
1918, Sears Archive, www.searsarchive.com (above)



95 Pell Place, New York City Tax Photo
New York City Municipal Archives, c. 1939 (left)

Stafford “Osborn” House

95 Pell Place, the Bronx

Designation List 502

LP-2479

Built: 1930

Architect: Sears, Roebuck and Company

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 5626, Lot 221

On June 28, 2011, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Captain John H. Stafford House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Public Hearing Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. At the public hearing, representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the Historic Districts Council spoke in favor of designation. The public hearing was continued on October 25, 2011 (Public Hearing Item No. 1), at which time there was no public testimony. The Commission received one letter in opposition of designation from the owner of the property.

Summary

Located at 95 Pell Place on City Island in the Bronx, the Stafford “Osborn” House was constructed in 1930 for the family of John H. Stafford (1889 - 1988), yacht captain to Marshall Field III, and is an authentic and highly intact Craftsman style bungalow from Sears, Roebuck and Company. Featuring front and side porches with prominent gabled roofs and

rustic materials such as stucco, wood timbers, and brick, the Stafford “Osborn” House is an excellent example of Sears' "Osborn" house model, offered in catalogues from 1916 until 1929 and advertised as inspired by the "Golden West." Between 1908 and 1940, Sears sold upwards of 50,000 houses in more than 400 different models through its Modern Homes division, becoming the nation's largest and most popular purveyor of factory-produced mail-order homes. Typical of many Sears catalogue homebuyers, the Staffords chose the Osborn model for its affordability, charm, and modern conveniences, and hired a local contractor to assemble the house on site. The Staffords also purchased a garage from Sears, which was erected to the rear of the house. The Stafford “Osborn” House represents an important period of technological and social innovation in the history of American housing, as well as the pattern of suburban-style residential development that occurred citywide during the early 20th century in response to a housing shortage and migration to the outer boroughs. The Stafford “Osborn” House survives as a remarkably intact Sears house in New York City.

Building Description

Stafford “Osborn” House

Historic¹

Free-standing, one-story frame bungalow with low-pitched, cross-gabled roof, wide front porch, side (east-facing) porch, and rear sleeping porch; exterior battered brick chimney on east facade and interior brick chimney towards rear of main roof; original clapboard siding on front, rear, and side walls; stucco cladding within gables; deeply overhanging eaves with exposed rafter ends; asphalt roofing (replacing original asphalt roofing); solid, scalloped porch walls and massive porch piers with stucco cladding and red-brick coping; arched drain openings with projecting sills in base of porch walls; concrete stoop with curved cheek walls, also stucco-clad with red-brick coping at front porch; painted wood posts (four on the front porch, two on the side porch) with perpendicular wood boards on each porch pier supporting similar beams laid crossways; paired, exposed roof rafters extending beyond vergeboards at apex of porch gables; historic beadboard porch ceilings; all original wood windows intact; two 18-over-one windows with historic four-light storm sash flanking main entry on primary (south-facing) facade; historic single-leaf main entry door with single wood panel and eight-light window with denticulated sill; historic three panel wood storm door with screen or glass upper panel; two small, nine-pane windows with wood storm sash flanking exterior chimney on east-facing facade; historic French doors flanked by two windows at side porch; original set of wood three-panel screen doors at French doors; two 2-over-2 windows set high on facade to right of side porch, with 1-over-1 storm

sash; one three-light basement window with wood storm sash visible on east-facing facade; six single windows, one paired window, and four basement windows on west-facing facade; rear (north-facing) facade is partially visible from Earley Street; wood attic louver at gable of rear facade; rear sleeping porch (now enclosed).

Alterations

Non-historic fascia boards and gutters at eaves on all facades, covering exposed rafter ends (installed after 1980s); corrugated metal installed on underside of porch eaves; sleeping porch on rear facade enclosed with windows and non-historic siding; flared roofline at gables removed; utility meter and conduit installed on primary facade to west of porch; non-historic light fixture affixed to east-facing fascia above front porch; non-historic mailbox to left of main entry; non-historic inset light fixture in ceilings of front and side porch; all windows covered by storm windows.

Garage

One-story frame two-car garage with pyramidal hipped roof; two bays each with triple folding wood-and-glass shed doors; asphalt roofing; rear facade (north-facing, visible from Earley Street) is clad in corrugated metal or plastic siding, historic window and trim intact; non-historic gutter and leaders installed.

Site

Picket fence to west of house; concrete curb enclosing front yard; historic ship's mast in front yard; concrete walkway leading to porch steps; historic pebble-dash concrete driveway with grass median and flanking grass strips, terminates in concrete pad in front of garage.

Site History

Stafford “Osborn” House

Early History and Development of City Island²

Initially, City Island was a farming community. The island's first commercial enterprise, a solar salt works, which produced salt from evaporated seawater, was established by E. C. Cooper in the 1820s. Around 1830, Orrin Fordham, a shipbuilder from Connecticut, established an oyster planting business on the east side of City Island.³ "Although it was common knowledge that oyster larvae set on almost any clean underwater object, especially oyster shells, in summertime,"⁴ no one in the United States prior to Fordham had deliberately planted shells in order to cultivate oysters. His idea revolutionized the business. In the latter half of the 19th century, oysters became the "chief fishery product of the United States" as well as the "most extensively eaten of all shellfish."⁵ Fulton Fish Market at the South Street Seaport in Manhattan became the primary clearinghouse for oysters grown not only in the local waters off City Island, Staten Island, and Raritan Bay, but for oysters from the Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and New England, which were shipped from the market across the country and overseas.

Between 1847 and 1869, numerous settlers moved to City Island to take part in the oyster business, which became "the chief industry employing the bulk of the male population at City Island."⁶ City Islanders also profited by servicing, supplying, and building ships, which supported the island's economy throughout most of the 20th century. There were many small yards serving the

oyster boats throughout the 19th century, but the first commercial shipyard, D. Carll Shipyard, was established in 1862.⁷ After the Civil War, the Carll yard became known for the construction and rebuilding of large luxury yachts. Capitalizing on the Carll shipyard's success, other commercial boatyards were soon established resulting in the construction of numerous luxury and racing yachts, including a number of America's Cup winners. The federal government also commissioned vessels from the City Island boatyards during both world wars. After World War II, the leisure-boating industry rose to prominence.

For much of its history City Island was part of the Town of Pelham, Westchester County. It was linked to the mainland by a toll bridge in 1873, which became a free bridge when the eastern Bronx was annexed by New York City in 1895. Limited access to the island discouraged dense development, and as a result the island has retained its small-town atmosphere. Numerous yacht clubs, marinas, and popular seafood restaurants continue to play a role in the island's economy.

Captain John H. Stafford⁸

John ("Jack") Herbert Stafford was born to English parents in Cranston, Rhode Island on April 16th 1889. Stafford began a long and illustrious maritime career as a young man, piloting a cat boat—a single-mast sailboat—on Narragansett Bay and working occasionally at the Conimicut lighthouse in New Warwick, Rhode Island. He moved to New York City in the late 1900s or early 1910s, where he met and married a young woman named Bertha Helen Stoehs.

The Staffords briefly moved to Flint, Michigan for Jack to pursue work as a machinist, but returned to New York by 1916. While visiting a friend on City Island, Stafford wandered into the Robert Jacob shipyard (formerly the Carll Shipyard)

and was offered a job by Mr. Jacob himself. At the shipyard, Stafford parlayed his skills as a machinist into a role as the yard's marine engineer, eventually earning his captain's license and later branching out into boat sales during winters spent in Florida.

Stafford's career as a yacht captain gained momentum between 1921 and 1922 when he was offered a job by Marshall Field III. Field, who was heir to the Chicago department store fortune and was one of America's wealthiest citizens, had just purchased Caumsett, a vast estate near Lloyd Neck on the north shore of Long Island, and was in need of a captain for the 50-foot commuter yacht that he had commissioned from boat builder Gar Woods of Algonac, Michigan. Stafford was well-suited to the position according to Marshall Field III's biographer, Stephen D. Becker; he "knew his way around motor yachts and had skippered for other wealthy men."⁹ In 1923, Stafford went out to Michigan to supervise the completion of the yacht, dubbed *Corisande*, and bring it home to Long Island. Construction on the boat lagged, however, and so Stafford and Field arranged to have *Corisande* finished at the Henry B. Nevins shipyard on City Island, which is where Stafford would keep the boat for the duration of his service as Field's captain.¹⁰

From the time *Corisande* was christened until Marshall Field's retirement in 1937, Stafford would pilot the yacht daily between City Island, Caumsett, and the New York Yacht Club station at 26th Street on the East River, where Field would disembark for the remainder of the trip down to his office on Wall Street in Lower Manhattan.¹¹ Beyond the duties of the daily commute, Stafford occasionally ferried Field's guests from Manhattan to Caumsett, including the King of Sweden on one occasion, and made trips to Newport, Rhode Island; Gloucester, Massachusetts; Dark Harbor, Maine; and, in July and August, to Saratoga Springs.¹²

Having established himself as a successful yacht captain and "master mariner"—the occupation listed on his 1942 United States Coast Guard identification card—Captain Stafford purchased a vacant lot on Pell Street in 1925 (later renamed Pell Place) from Minneford Realty Corporation.¹³ During the 1910s and 1920s, the southern portion of the island was undergoing considerable development as the real estate industry responded to an increased citywide demand for modern, middle-class housing, and as local companies sought to lure people to City Island by promoting its waterfront charm and quiet, small-town feel. After holding the property on Pell Street for five years, the Staffords built their house, a Sears catalogue house, on the lot in 1930. Captain Stafford, a distinguished member of City Island's maritime community, lived in the house at 95 Pell Place until his death at the age of 98, in early 1988.

Origins of the Mail-Order House in America¹⁴

A mail-order house is one in which the plans, the framing lumber (either pre-cut and fitted at the factory or uncut), the millwork, and interior fixtures and finishes, are sold from a catalogue as a package, or "kit," and shipped by rail directly to the homebuyer for assembly on site. The origins of the mail-order house can be traced as far back as the 17th century, when prefabricated structures – including settlers' cottages, hospitals, government buildings, churches, and other types of buildings – were transported globally across land and sea to serve the needs of colonial settlements. Typically composed of wood or iron panels bolted together on site, prefabricated structures could be erected or "knocked down" quickly and without specialized tools, were portable, and were ideally suited to temporary uses. In the history of traditional building, the advent of the balloon frame in the mid-19th century, which was made possible by mill-cut lumber and factory-produced nails, was the single most important factor

contributing to the development of the mail-order house.¹⁵

Another important influence on the development of mail-order houses in America was the architectural pattern books of the mid-19th century, which presented picturesque house and garden designs meant for the prospective homeowner.¹⁶ In America, the plan book genre was associated with Asher Benjamin, who published *The Country Builder's Assistant* in 1797, which provided builders with guides to building in the then popular Federal and Greek Revival styles. However, the primary proponent of the pattern book tradition was landscape designer and architectural theorist Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), whose publications *Cottage Residences* (1842) and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) set the tone for pattern books by other authors.¹⁷ Even more widely available than the pattern book in the mid-19th century was the ladies' magazine, which began featuring house plans "borrowed" from different pattern books, disseminating them to a broader audience. By the 1840s, popular publications such as *Godey's Ladies Book* were offering house plans for sale to a nation of aspiring homeowners, a trend that continued well into the 20th century with publications such as *House Beautiful*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The sale of house plans through popular publications ultimately formed the basis for the mail-order house model of the early 20th century.¹⁸

Sears, Roebuck and Company's Modern Homes Division¹⁹

On the strength of Sears, Roebuck and Company's burgeoning success as the nation's premier catalogue retailer,²⁰ the company launched its Modern Homes division in 1908, spurred by developments in factory technology, the increasing efficiency and broadening reach of rail transport, a critical housing shortage nationwide, and the concurrent demand for

affordable, modern homes among America's quickly urbanizing population. From its humble origins as a side business of Richard W. Sears, who began selling discount watches through the mail while working as a railroad station agent in Minnesota in the mid-1880s, Sears, Roebuck and Company grew to become the nation's most popular mail-order merchandiser, and later retailer, as well as America's largest purveyor of mail-order homes in the period between World War I and World War II. By 1940, when Sears finally closed its mail-order home business, the company had sold upwards of 50,000 mail-order houses in over 400 different models, and "Sears house" had become virtually synonymous with a mail-order house.²¹

Although it became the best-known company nationally, Sears was not first in the field of mail-order houses. Several other companies, notably the Aladdin Company of Bay City, Michigan, were already (or soon to be) in business by the time Sears issued its first *Modern Homes* catalogue in 1908.²² Several factors influenced Sears' entry into the mail-order home business, most notably that the company had been selling building materials through its catalogue since 1896,²³ and had even published a carpenter's manual, *Practical Carpentry*, in 1907. In 1906, when Sears' department manager, Frank Kushel, was told to close the building materials department because of lackluster sales, he instead convinced the company to transform the department into a vehicle for manufacturing and selling houses directly to the homebuyer, and thus the Modern Homes division began. Kushel is credited with recognizing the cost savings—both for Sears and for the customer—that could be achieved by purchasing building materials in volume, factory cutting lumber and millwork, and shipping directly to the customer from the mill or factory.²⁴ A *New York Times* article from 1932 described this innovation:

Mass production has been applied to every industry except the building industry ... Sears-Roebuck's entrance into the home-building field is one of the few forward steps that home building has seen in the last century.²⁵

The 1908 catalogue, Sears's *Book of Modern Homes and Building Plans*, marked the beginning of the company's foray into the mail-order house business, although what was actually being offered was still limited to catalogue houses in the 19th-century sense: house plans and corresponding bills of materials and specifications could be purchased for a mere dollar, but with no building materials included. By 1911, however, Sears began offering packages of house plans *and* lumber, and by 1918 the company was offering house plans that came with pre-cut and fitted lumber: the true "mail-order" house. Sears modeled their pre-cut lumber operation after Aladdin's "Readi-Cut" system, where lumber was measured, cut, fitted, and stamped at the factory for easy assembly on site.²⁶ These kits, which Sears marketed under the Honor-Bilt Modern Homes label, came with a lengthy construction manual, a shipping schedule (materials would arrive in phases to coincide with the stages of construction), an origin sheet (noting the locations materials were being shipped from), a paint catalogue, and a certificate of guarantee. Written for both the homeowner and the contractor, the construction manuals included detailed instructions for every stage of construction. Blueprints included elevations, floor plans, a foundation plan, and framing details, and each piece of stamped lumber that came in the kit was keyed to the blueprints.

The success of Sears' Modern Homes program can be attributed to the company's shrewd advertising and the demonstrated cost-effectiveness of the mail-order house as a modern consumer

product. Using the catalogue as a sophisticated marketing tool, Sears "attempted to make ordering a home as easy as ordering an automobile, radio or piece of furniture."²⁷ The *Modern Homes* catalogues featured an array of house models to choose from, each illustrated with an idealized image of the house set within an appealing suburban landscape, accompanied by a floor plan and a list of exterior and interior features.²⁸ Sears introduced the ingenious system of naming rather than simply numbering its house models, choosing names that would evoke romantic associations of time and place, conferring a certain status, appeal, or glamour on the houses.²⁹ Customer testimonials were another device used to convey the legitimacy and desirability of the product, and also made the catalogues read more like a popular magazine than an old-fashioned dry goods catalogue.

On prominent display in the catalogues was the price of each home model, from the least expensive to the most expensive, for example: in the 1908 catalogue, the models ranged in price from \$601, for a two-bedroom cottage, to \$2,500, for a four-bedroom house with one bathroom. Because the costs of land, labor, and key construction components such as masonry materials for foundations, basements, and porches, and plumbing and electrical systems, were not included in the quoted price, the customer was immediately impressed by the affordability of a Sears mail-order house. The "hidden" costs of materials and services not offered by Sears could nevertheless be calculated and factored into the final cost estimate using forms provided towards the back of *Modern Homes* catalogues. Sears promoted the idea that their pre-cut houses represented substantial cost savings for the homebuyer, citing the fact that the services of an architect or skilled carpenter were no longer necessary; that the total cost of a Sears house, factoring in all the "extras" specified by the

homebuyer, could be calculated before construction even began; and, finally, that the time it took to erect the typical Honor-Bilt home was a fraction of the time it took to erect a traditional or custom-built house.³⁰ Despite the inaccuracy of the low prices advertised up front by Sears, sales records and popular acclaim indicate that their mail-order homes proved to be an affordable option for many would-be homeowners of all socioeconomic classes.³¹ Sears also offered generous home mortgage plans from 1918 until 1933, making homeownership seem even more attainable to the average family.³²

Sears Modern Homes customers were encouraged to "customize" their home, and the catalogues advertised that floor plans could be flipped, different finishes or materials chosen, and porches and dormers added or removed, among other modifications. The ability to customize a Sears house was an important selling point for the individual customer, but customization could also help mask the factory-made origins of a mail-order house and overcome any lingering associations with prefabricated or temporary housing.³³ Sears' advertising strategy and the general success of its Modern Homes program contributed in large part to a growing acceptance of the factory-made home in America, and by 1921, a writer in *Today's Housewife* could declare that " ... houses made in the factory and assembled on the ground are quite the accepted thing in polite society."³⁴

With respect to the technology of its manufacture and final assembly, the mail-order home represents an important, if short-lived, period of experimentation and innovation in the history of American housing. In contrast, its architecture relied on traditional, tried-and-true designs.³⁵ From 1908 to 1940, Sears Modern Homes were designed in a range of popular architectural styles, with several models exhibiting a combination of different stylistic characteristics or vernacular elements.³⁶ Over its 32-

year history, Sears *Modern Homes* offered only three models designed in avant-garde architectural styles: the Aurora and the Carlton, designed in the Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced Prairie style, and the Bryant, designed in a modern style. Certain house types, notably the bungalow and the foursquare, were among the most popular and enduring of Sears models, and appeared in a variety of stylistic guises. Ultimately, Sears Modern Homes brought the full range of historical architectural styles to the American consumer, but in a form modified by scale and materials and often lacking any relation to local or regional building traditions.

The Osborn: a Sears Craftsman Bungalow³⁷

The bungalow proved to be Sears' most popular house in style and plan, a reflection of the type's broader success in the American housing market of the early 20th century. The bungalow debuted in America in 1880, in an article in *American Architect and Building News* featuring a picturesque seaside cottage designed by Boston architect William Gibbons Preston, but it wasn't until the second decade of the 20th century that it achieved a considerable presence in America. Many small houses were called bungalows but gradually the term evolved to indicate a small, picturesque structure, one or one-and-a-half stories high, with an open floor plan, and roofs with wide overhanging eaves. Bungalows included porches, sleeping porches or pergolas, and groups of windows (either casement or double-hung with small panes) to link the interior and exterior living spaces. Although bungalows were constructed in a variety of materials all over the country, as a house type they proved particularly suited to warmer climates and early on became strongly associated with California.

Although many of the bungalow's common features recall Craftsman-style architecture, the bungalow is best understood as a building type to

which many different styles could be applied, including Craftsman but also, popularly, Colonial Revival.³⁸ In America, Craftsman style architecture was introduced by Pennsylvania furniture-maker Gustav Stickley, who was deeply influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century that espoused the moral and social virtues of pre-industrial building traditions and handicrafts.³⁹ Stickley's houses, like his furniture, were based on the idea of a simple, straightforward design, created to fulfill its unique purpose, using quality materials, with no extraneous ornament. Craftsman style houses ranged from small bungalows to more substantial, two-story models, and their finishes could be stucco, shingles, or clapboard. Chimneys were an important element on the exterior, drawing attention to the hearth as the center of the home, and were often emphasized through the use of contrasting materials. The roof was an important feature of this style, always including wide overhanging eaves with exposed rafter ends. These overhangs were symbolic of the actual and psychological shelter the home would provide for its inhabitants. Porches and pergolas were often featured for the link they provided to the outdoors. Craftsman houses were comfortable and promoted an informal, family-centered life.

Although Craftsman architecture was defined by relatively few high-style examples, the preeminent example being Greene & Greene's Gamble House in Pasadena (1908), it was through the catalogue house, and, in particular, the bungalow – widely disseminated to a national market, imitative in style, and manufactured in huge numbers – that the Craftsman aesthetic achieved widespread popularity and acceptance as an "American style." Of the Craftsman-style bungalow's success, historian Gwendolyn Wright writes, "a Craftsman bungalow from a mail-order company combined mass-production techniques with the allure of personal

craftsmanship in the final assembly."⁴⁰ The Craftsman bungalow's hand-crafted, picturesque aesthetic certainly contributed to its mass appeal, while its small scale, economical plan, and incorporation of new household technologies responded to the changing needs of the middle-class American family in the period between World War I and World War II.⁴¹ In its form, scale, materials, and color palette, the Sears' Osborn represents the quintessential American Craftsman-style bungalow. In addition to its promise of affordability and standardized quality, the Osborn model was meant to evoke images of a healthful, sun-filled, southern California lifestyle: an ideal house "from the Golden West," as the Sears advertising copy suggested.

The Stafford "Osborn" House⁴²

Captain Stafford and his family purchased a Sears mail-order house in 1929 or early 1930 to build on the lot they had owned since 1925. The model they chose was called "The Osborn," a one-story Craftsman style stucco-and-shingle bungalow with three porches, and offered in almost every Sears *Modern Homes* catalogue from 1916 until 1929.⁴³ The long and narrow plan of the Osborn made it especially suited to a city lot. The Staffords' "Osborn" is an authentic and remarkably intact example of a Sears mail-order house,⁴⁴ and represents an important period in the history of American housing and in the development of City Island as a suburban community.

Plans for the Staffords' "Osborn" were submitted to the Department of Buildings in February 1930, and specified a one-story frame house and a free-standing frame garage, to be supplied by Sears.⁴⁵ Like virtually all Sears' catalogue house models offered after 1918, the Staffords' house was shipped by rail from a factory as a package of pre-cut framing lumber and other exterior and interior components, and arrived on site

(probably by truck) to be assembled by the owner or a hired builder or contractor.⁴⁶ The garage, probably of sectional construction, was a simple 18-by-18-foot box with two bays, paneled doors with transoms, and a pyramidal roof. Typical of many Sears catalogue homebuyers, Stafford hired a local carpenter, Roland E. Lloyd of Jamaica, Queens, to assemble the house and garage on site. Lloyd was listed as superintendent of construction on the original building permit, and Sears, Roebuck and Company was listed as the architect. According to the permit, the house was to measure 26-feet wide by 44-feet deep (not including porches), covering roughly 25% of the lot, with a cellar and concrete-block foundation walls, platform framing, and a peaked roof covered in an asphalt roofing system (most likely shingles).⁴⁷ The total cost of construction was \$9,000 (\$500 for the garage and \$8,500 for the house), appreciably higher than the price of \$2,656.00 advertised for the Osborn in the 1928 catalogue. However, included in the final figure was the cost of the masonry, not sold by Sears, and plumbing and electrical systems, not included in the house package, but offered as "extras" in the Sears catalogue. Construction of the Staffords' house was complete by August, 1930.

As built, the house differed in some ways from the Sears Osborn model.⁴⁸ A color advertisement from the Sears Archive online shows a quintessential bungalow, with the porches, gables, and chimney clad in gray stucco; the main volume of the house clad in dark-stained wood shingles; dark-stained window sash, porch posts, and rafter ends; and a flared roofline at the gables. White trim around the doors and windows, white vergeboards, a white porch trellis, and red-brick coping at the porches provided accents of color and contrast.⁴⁹ The Osborn was described in detail in the 1928 advertisement, whose tone appealed to the potential homebuyer's ideals of comfort, style, and domesticity:

The Osborn is the most pleasing type of stucco and shingle sided bungalow in Spanish mission architecture... Here the architect has given careful study to every detail, and furnished a creation that is striking, yet restful... the Osborn will appeal to the lover of nature because of its two open porches both sheltered by the main roof, and the sleeping porch in the rear.

Originally, the Staffords' Osborn conformed to the advertised model in that it had light-colored stucco cladding and brick coping in the areas specified, and also the flared roofline; but the main volume of the house was clad in clapboards instead of shingles, the vergeboards were dark-stained instead of white, the porch posts were white instead of dark-stained, and the chimney was red brick instead of stucco. The clapboard cladding and white porch posts diverged most obviously from the intended aesthetic, giving the house a slightly less rustic feel. Overall, however, the Staffords' house appeared as a nearly picture-perfect copy of the Osborn model, thus delivering on Sears' promise of supplying the ideal home at an affordable price.

Subsequent History

Captain Jack Stafford lived at 95 Pell Place until his death at the age of 98 in 1988, whereupon the house passed to his second son, Arthur, who owned it until 1991 when it was sold out of the family.⁵⁰ Today, 87 years later, the Stafford "Osborn" House survives largely intact except for minor maintenance-related modifications.

Report researched and written by

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Endnotes

¹ Sources for building description and original design of the Sears' Osborn: Photograph of 95 Pell Place, c. 1939-41 (Department of Finance "Tax Photograph" Collection, Municipal Archives); Photographs (2) of 95 Pell Place, c. 1980s (LPC Current Research File); historic catalogue advertisement for "The Osborn" model (courtesy of Tom Nye, Curator, City Island Historical Society and Nautical Museum); 1928 *Honor Bilt Homes* catalogue advertisement for "The Osborn" (LPC files); Historic catalogue illustration of "The Osborn" model (Sears Archives website.

http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/images/l915-1920/1918_2050.jpg); Stevenson, Katherine Cole and H. Ward Jandl. *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1986), 203.

² This section on the history of City Island is adapted from the following sources; which can also be referenced for additional earlier history of City Island: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Samuel Pell House Designation Report* (LP-2115) (New York: City of New York, 2002), prepared by Gale Harris; LPC, *21 Tier Street House Designation Report* (LP-2063) (New York: City of New York, 2000), prepared by Loretta Lorraine; and is based on information from the following sources: LPC, *Bronx Survey* (New York: City of New York, 1978), 148-149; Department of City Planning, Waterfront & Open Space Division, "*There is an Island...* ": *City Island's Growth and Development*, prepared by Jolanta M. Grajski (New York: City of New York, 1999); DCP, Waterfront & Open Space Division, "A Maritime History of City Island", draft report prepared by Jolanta M. Grajski, 1999 (copy available at the LPC in the "City Island," Bronx current research file); Lloyd Ultan, "City Island," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 231; Stephen Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx* (New York: G. B. Putnam's, 1912), 39, 48-49, 51-56, 427-432; Lockwood Barr, *Ancient Town of Pelham* (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, Inc., 1946), 12-44, 80-87; Alice Payne, *Tales of the Clamdiggers* (Floral Park, NY: Graphiccopy, Inc., 1969).

³ This information on oystering on City Island is based on the Department of City Planning, "Maritime History of City Island," 2-5; James Richardson, "American Oyster

Culture," *Scribner's Monthly*, 15 (December 1877), 225-237; Alfred Fordham, "City Island: its History and Growth," *City Island News*, October 1, 1953; John M. Kochiss, *Oystering from New York to Boston* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport, Inc., 1974).

⁴ Kochiss, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ixx

⁶ Fordham, "City Island: Its History and Growth," October 1, 1953.

⁷ Richard F. Welch, *An Island's Trade: Nineteenth-Century Shipbuilding on Long Island* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1993), 35.

⁸ Information in this section is based on the following sources: U.S. Federal Census Records, 1930; Jack Smith, "The Living Past: A Commuter-boat Captain Recalls a Golden Age in Yachting in New York," *Power and Motoryacht* (January 1988): 154-160; "World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," Ancestry Library Edition (online); "U.S. World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942," Ancestry Library Edition (online); "Social Security Death Index," Ancestry Library Edition (online); "Henry B. Nevins, Inc. Shipyard Collection," Mystic Seaport Museum website.

<http://library.mysticseaport.org/manuscripts/coll/spcoll028.cfrn#head86003704>; Dorothea Cappadonna, "Caumsett, the Estate of Marshall Field the III", Caumsett Foundation website. <http://www.caumsettfoundation.org/CaumsettSite/EstateofMarshall.html>; "Caumsett State Historic Park", New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, & Historic Preservation website.

<http://www.nysparks.com/parks/23/details.aspx>; "Nautical Diversions," Caumsett Foundation website.

<http://www.caumsettfoundation.org/CaumsettSite/Nautical.html>; "Robert Jacob Shipyard, City Island, New York", Index to U.S. Shipbuilders and Boatbuilders website.

<http://shipbuildinghistory.com/history/shipyards/6yachtsmall/jacob.htm>; "History", Gar Wood Boats website.

⁹ Stephen D. Becker, *Marshall Field III: a Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 108.

¹⁰ The Henry B. Nevins shipyard was located at the foot of Winters Street (two blocks north of Pell Street) at City Island Avenue; the site is now the location of a public school.

¹¹ The trip from City Island to Caumsett took about 20 minutes on *Corisande*, whose top speed was 39 knots (approximately 45 miles per hour), and from Caumsett to the 26th Street dock took less than an hour. In 1924,

Corisande held the speed record for the trip between the Albany Yacht Club and the Columbia Yacht Club on Manhattan, making it in four hours and twenty minutes. Smith, "The Living Past," 160.

¹² After Field retired in 1937, he sold *Corisande* and, with Stafford's assistance, purchased a 65-foot cruiser from the Jacob shipyard, naming it *Corisande II*. Stafford's son Arthur worked aboard *Corisande II* for several summers until 1941, when Field donated the yacht to the Coast Guard Reserve for the World War II war effort. It is unclear how long Stafford remained employed as Field's captain; Field died in 1956.

¹³ Secondary sources indicate that the property on Pell Street had previously belonged to Patrick Byrnes, the longtime operator of City Island's only horsecar line, which ran from the foot of the island to the Bartow station on the New Haven Railway until it was replaced by electric trolley service ca. 1915. Official property records indicate that the lot at 95 Pell Street was purchased, along with scores of other lots in the immediate vicinity, sometime before 1923 by City Island Homes, Inc., which was active as early as 1912 and proved to be one of the island's biggest developers in the early part of the 20th century. The group of lots was sold by City Island Homes, Inc., to Minneford Realty Corporation on September 29, 1923. Minneford Realty then sold individual lots to future homeowners such as the Staffords, and by 1927 ten structures had been erected on Pell Street. Bronx County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 418, page 90 (September 29, 1923), and Liber 527, page 36 (October 7, 1925); Barbara Dolensek, "Morris Yacht Club Will Rise from the Ashes," *The Island Current*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (April 2006); "Historic Pelham," online blog written by Blake A. Bell, Town Historian and Town Clerk of Pelham, NY.

<http://historicpelham.blogspot.com/2010/02/attempted-suicide-of-city-islands-long.html> (Retrieved September 27, 2011); *Atlas of the City of New York, Borough of the Bronx, Annexed District* (Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1927).

¹⁴ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981); Gilbert Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory-Made House: Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1984); Gilbert Herbert, *Pioneers of Prefabrication: the British Contribution in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Robert Schweitzer and Michael Davis, *America's Favorite*

Homes: Mail-Order Catalogues As a Guide to Popular Early 20th-Century Houses (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Schweitzer and Davis, 50.

¹⁶ Joselow, 23.

¹⁷ Other influential pattern book authors included Edward Shaw (*Rural Architecture*, 1843), Alexander Jackson Davis (*Rural Residences*, 1842), and Calvert Vaux (*Villas and Cottages*, 1854). Wright, 80.

¹⁸ Joselow, 25.

¹⁹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Wright, *Building the Dream*; James C. Worthy, *Shaping an American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory-Made House*; Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1986); Evie T. Joselow, *The Ideal Catalogue House: Mail-Order Architecture and Consumer Culture, 1914-1930*. PhD. Dissertation, 2 vols. (New York: City University of New York, 1998); Sears, Roebuck and Company, *Homes in a Box: Modern Homes from Sears Roebuck*. Reprint. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1998); Schweitzer and Davis, *America's Favorite Homes*; Leland Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2001); Rosemary Thornton, *The Houses that Sears Built*, 2nd ed. (Alton, IL: Gentle Beam, 2004); Sears, Roebuck and Company, *Ready Made Buildings* (Chicago, IL: Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1914); Sears, Roebuck and Company, *Homes of Today* (Chicago, IL: Sears Home Construction Division, 1932); and "History of Sears Modern Homes," "Homes Index," and "Chronology of Sears Modern Homes Program," Sears Archives website, <http://www.searsarchives.com/>

²⁰ Sears' sales jumped from \$750,000 in 1895 to \$10 million in 1900, and \$50 million by 1907. Worthy, 28-31.

²¹ It is unclear just how many house kits Sears sold between 1908 and 1940, because company records do not survive. In the 1939 catalogue, Sears boasted of housing over "100,000 American families" in its Honor Bilt homes, although 50,000 houses is probably a more accurate number. For comparison, Aladdin Homes (whose sales records were preserved) sold approximately 50,000 homes during its entire 81-year history. Schweitzer and Davis, 81.

²² The Aladdin Company began operations in 1906 as the

North American Construction Company, and issued its last house catalogue in 1980. Other companies active during the heyday of the mail-order house in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, included the E.F. Hodgson Co. of Dover, MA.; the Ray H. Bennett Lumber Co. of North Tonawanda, NY; the Gordon-Van Tine Co. of Davenport, IA; the International Mill & Timber Co. and the Lewis Manufacturing Co./Liberty-Lewis Homes of Bay City, MI; and the Montgomery Ward and Harris Brothers companies of Chicago, IL. Joselow, 2; Schweitzer and Davis, 86.

²³ 1896 was the year that Congress passed the Rural Free Delivery Act, which allowed free delivery of magazines and catalogues to rural mailboxes, a move that led to a great surge in catalogue shopping nationwide and proved a particular boon to farmers, whose access to goods was limited by geography and price. Initially, Sears, Roebuck and Company's business strategy was to serve as "buyer for the American farmer," recognizing that the farmer was likely turn to catalogue shopping before the urbanite, and also because of the still largely agricultural economy of the Midwest, where Sears was located. During the heyday of the Modern Homes division, farmers still formed a large part of the Sears's customer base, in part because they often owned the land they farmed, making the purchase of a mail-order house a particularly sensible option. Robert Schweitzer, "Homes From a Box," *Victorian Homes* (October 1999), 34-37: 35; "Rural Mailboxes", National Postal Museum website, Smithsonian Institution.

http://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2b2c_ruralmailbox.html (Retrieved October 2011); Worthy, 26; Daniel D. Rieff, *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 189.

²⁴ Stevenson and Jandl, 20.

²⁵ "Hold Mass Output Aids Home Building," *New York Times* (January 8, 1932), 40.

²⁶ Each piece of Sears pre-cut lumber was stamped with a number-and-letter combination that corresponded to keyed instructions on the blueprint; revealing stamped lumber in a house's attic or basement is one way to identify a Sears mail-order house.

²⁷ Stevenson and Jandl, 25.

²⁸ Interior views were sometimes featured to help the prospective homeowner imagine the kind of lifestyle he or she could cultivate in a Sears house; these interior views also showcased the range of home furnishings that could

be purchased from the Sears Modern Homes catalogue. The typical Sears house kit provided the homebuyer with the following materials, included in the purchase price: framing lumber, millwork, cabinetry, lath, roofing materials, siding, building paper, downspouts, doors, window sash, shutters, hardware, nails, paint, and varnish. Not included in the purchase price, nor offered by Sears, were masonry materials, including brick, concrete block, cobblestones, plaster, and other masonry products. Sears offered, at extra charge, plumbing, heating, and electrical systems and fixtures, screens, storm windows, and plasterboard. Stevenson and Jandl, 29.

²⁹ Model names could be patriotic in tone, such as the Martha Washington and the Jefferson; exotic, like the Alhambra and the Corona; or sober and dignified, as with the Oxford and the Sherburne.

³⁰ Although construction of a Sears mail-order home allegedly did not require technical expertise or special tools, the idea of a do-it-yourself house kit became an easy target for critics. A 1920 Buster Keaton film, *One Week*, presents a delightful parody of the mail-order house phenomenon by showing the comedic foibles and disastrous results of a young couple's ill-fated attempts to put together a kit house.

³¹ Joselow, 186.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ Sears mail-order houses proved particularly suitable as industrial or worker housing, demonstrated by the fact that major corporations such as Standard Oil and Bethlehem Steel placed large orders for houses from Sears and its competitors. Joselow, 222; Stevenson and Jandl, 21.

³⁴ Delia Thompson Lutes, "Homes - Ready To Wear". *Today's Housewife*, vol. 17 (April 1921): 18. As cited in Joselow, 165.

³⁵ Sears appealed directly to Americans' sense of patriotism by constructing replicas of famous historical landmarks, including two of George Washington's Mount Vernon (one commissioned by the federal government and displayed at the 1931 Paris exposition, the other commissioned for the Washington Bicentennial celebration and erected in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, also in 1931), and one of New York's Federal Hall (also commissioned for the Washington Bicentennial). Stevenson and Jandl, 25.

³⁶ Historians have identified four general sources for Sears's architectural designs: purchase of designs directly from architects, probably most common in the early years of the Modern Homes division; designs from architects

employed by Sears, who were referred to by the company in publications not as "architects" but as a staff of "experts"; adaptation of popular published designs by Sears architects; and purchase of designs from popular magazines. As Sears became more sophisticated in its marketing, it advertised the input of women advisors on the design of its houses, reflecting the housewife's new status as the primary consumer for the American family. Records indicate that Sears employed at least one female architect. Stevenson and Jandl, 32; Joselow, 218.

³⁷ Portions of this section are adapted from LPC, *Mark W Allen House Designation Report* (LP-2190) (New York: City of New York, 2006), prepared by Virginia Kurshan. Other information in this section is based on the following sources: Alan Gowans, *The Comfortable House* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986); Rieff, *Houses From Book*, 172-178; and Wright, *Building the American Dream*, 158-176.

³⁸ Architectural historian Alan Gowans takes pains to point out that the bungalow should be considered a house type, with a distinctive form deriving from integral elements, rather than as an architectural *style* - *despite* the bungalow's strong associations with the Craftsman style and its vernacular offshoots. According to Gowans, the bungalow form can be defined by its lack of a basement; the presence of a prominent roof and porch; its visual appearance as a one or one-and-a-half story structure; and an interior layout based on interpenetration of indoor and outdoor space. Gowans, 74-83.

³⁹ Wright, 162.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴¹ Wright discusses such factors as decreased family size, changing social and gender roles, urbanization, and, perhaps most important, the new availability and affordability of household technologies like plumbing, electricity, and labor-saving appliances, in her analysis of the bungalow as a progressive housing type in the early 20th century. *Ibid.*, 158-166.

⁴² Information in this section is based on the following sources: "Homes Index," Sears Archives website; New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building Permit No. 60-30 (1930); "Bronx Building Plans," *NYT* (February 6, 1930), 46; New York City Department of Finance "Tax Photograph" Collection, Municipal Archives; "The Osborn," *Honor Bilt Homes* (Chicago, IL: Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1928), 84; and U.S. Federal Census Records, 1930.

⁴³ A handful of catalogues between those years did not

include the Osborn, including the catalogues of 1917, 1920, 1924, and 1927.

⁴⁴ Historians and experts agree that it is very difficult to prove the authenticity of a Sears mail-order house from visual analysis alone, without archival or material documentation. In the case of the Stafford house, the fact that it is an obvious visual match to the Osborn house design coupled with the substantial historical record strongly support the conclusion that it is indeed the genuine article. Other extant Osborn houses have been identified in Chicago and Joliet, IL, Dearborn, MI, Bay Village, OH, and Brightwood, Morton, and New Cumberland, PA. Stevenson and Jandl, 203.

⁴⁵ In the 1928 catalogue the Osborn model was advertised as including in the purchase price the following materials: lumber, lath, roofing, framing lumber, flooring, sleeping porch floor, porch ceiling, finishing lumber, high grade mill work, interior doors, trim, windows, screens for the sleeping porch, medicine case, kitchen cabinet, kitchen cupboard, bookcase colonnade, bookcases, mantel, wall safe, window seats, eaves trough and down spout, heavy water-proof building paper, sash weights, Narcissus design hardware, stain (one-dip coat for shingles and walls), shellac and two coats of varnish for interior trim and doors, wood filler and two coats of varnish for oak floors, and two coats of varnish for maple floors. The following materials were suggested as "extras," at additional cost: sheet plaster and plaster finish (instead of wood lath), "Oriental" asphalt shingles (guaranteed 17 years) or "4-in-1 Style Oriental Asphalt Slate Surfaced Strip Shingles," instead of wood shingles, oak doors and trim for living and dining rooms, storm doors and windows, and screen doors and windows. Not included in the purchase price were plumbing, heating, wiring, and electric systems and fixtures, however these items were sold by Sears and advertised in the Modern Homes catalogues. *Honor Bilt Homes*, 84.

⁴⁶ It is possible that the majority of the pre-cut lumber and other materials for the Stafford's Sears house was manufactured at and shipped from the Port Newark, New Jersey plant, given its proximity to City Island; however, without documentation, the origin of the house's component parts is impossible to determine. Similarly, one can only speculate as to whether the Staffords visited the nearest Sears Modern Homes sales office to select and buy their house, or completed the process of selection, purchase, and customization entirely by mail. An advertisement for Sears Modern Homes that appeared in the *New York Times* on February 9, 1928, listed the following locations for sales offices or Sears

representatives in the New York metropolitan area: Hempstead, LI; Elizabeth, Morristown, Paterson, Hackensack, and New Brunswick, NJ; and White Plains and Peekskill, NY. Sears corporate offices were located at 115 at Fifth Avenue, in New York, and at 1000 Broad Street, in Newark, NJ. "Before You Build," *NYT* (February 9, 1928), 16.

⁴⁷ The house was to have frame and plaster interior partitions; a full bathroom with tile floor and porcelain enamel fixtures on the main floor, and two wash basins in the cellar; and hot-water heating.

⁴⁸ Small differences may have been due to modifications specified by the Staffords during the final phase of the ordering process, the result of unforeseen conditions on site during construction, or simply the builder's personal preferences.

⁴⁹ "Sears Homes, 1915-1920," Sears Archives website. <http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/1915-1920.htm>

⁵⁰ Bronx County, Office of the Register, Online Deeds and Conveyances, Reel 1032, p. 1495 (February 25, 1991), 15.

Findings and Designation

Stafford “Osborn” House

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Stafford “Osborn” House has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and culture characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Stafford “Osborn” House was constructed in 1930 to the designs of Sears, Roebuck and Company; that it was constructed for the family of John H. Stafford (1889-1988), yacht captain to Marshall Field III, heir to the Marshall Field department store fortune; that it is an authentic and highly intact Craftsman style bungalow from Sears, Roebuck and Company; that it features front and side porches with prominent gabled roofs and rustic materials such as stucco, wood timbers, and brick; that it is an excellent example of Sears' "Osborn" house model, which was offered in catalogues from 1916 until 1929 and advertised as inspired by the "Golden West"; that between 1908 and 1940, Sears sold upwards of 50,000 houses in over 400 different models through its Modern Homes division, becoming the nation's largest and most popular purveyor of factory-produced mail-order homes; that these houses were popular for their affordability, charm, and modern conveniences; that the Staffords chose a Sears home and hired a local contractor to assemble the house on site; that the Staffords also purchased a garage from Sears, which

was erected to the rear of the house; that the house represents an important period of technological and social innovation in the history of American housing; and that it also reflects the pattern of suburban-style residential development that occurred citywide during the early 20th century in response to a housing shortage and migration to the outer boroughs.

Meenakshi Srinivasin, Chair

Wellington Chen
Michael Devonshire
Michael Goldblum
John Gustafsson
Jeanne Lutfy
Adi Shamir-Baron
Kim Vauss
Commissioners



Stafford "Osborn" House
95 Pell Place, City Island
Sarah Moses (LPC), November 2017



95 Pell Place, Urban Cultural Resources Survey, LPC, c. 1980



Stafford "Osborn" House, Sarah Moses (LPC), 2017



**Stafford "Osborn" House,
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2017**





**Garage, front, from Pell Place,
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2017**



**Garage, rear, from Pell Place,
Sarah Moses (LPC), 2017**

