

## RESOURCE EVALUATION

**DATE:** April 27, 2017

**STAFF:** Lorraine Weiss

**PROPERTY:** - Happy House - John W. and Gwen R. Mackay

**ADDRESS:** 2A Melby Lane, East Hills

**COUNTY:** Nassau

**PROJECT REF:** 17PR02800

**USN:** 05910.000044

- I.  Property is individually listed on SR/NR: name of listing:  
 Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district: name of district:
- II.  Properties meet eligibility criteria.  
 Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.  
**Pre SRB:**  **Post SRB:**  SRB date

### Criteria for Inclusion in the National Register:

- A.  Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B.  Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C.  Embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possesses high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- D.  Have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.
- III.  Property does not meet eligibility criteria.

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The property at 2A Melby Lane, East Hills, formerly known as Happy House, was built in 1929 (one wing added 1936) for John W. Mackay III and Gwendolyn Rose Mackay and designed by John W. Cross of Cross and Cross, Architects.<sup>1</sup> It is eligible for listing on the State and National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A under social history for its association with the Mackay (*mackie*) family, of the Comstock Lode and Postal Telegraph and Cable Corporation (later ITT); and also under Criterion C as an example of the Tudor Revival architectural style.

#### Criterion A

John W. Mackay III was the grandson of John Mackay who discovered the Comstock Lode in Nevada in 1873; and who founded the Postal Telegraph and Cable Corporation, which laid transatlantic cables. His parents were Clarence and Katherine Duer Mackay, who hired Stanford White to build their Harbor House estate in 1902 (now the location of the Country Estates neighborhood.) Clarence Mackay continued his father's work and completed the construction of a cable across the Pacific Ocean. The Mackays' businesses were eventually consolidated and bought by International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) in 1928. Katherine Mackay became active in the Suffrage Movement and was the founder of the Equal Franchise Society in 1908. She had entered public life by running for the Roslyn School Board in 1905.<sup>2</sup> That same year, she began to work with Stanford White to build the Roslyn Trinity Episcopal Church Parish House and Church.<sup>3</sup>

John and Gwen Mackay were very involved in the social life of Long Island from the beginning of their marriage, supporting a number of events to raise funds for charitable causes, including the Women's division of Architects' Emergency Committee (a relief fund for architects and engineers during Great Depression), the Nassau County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and many others. John served as chairman of the county Red Cross Disaster Program in the 1950s. He went to work for his father's firm, the Postal Telegraph Company, as reported in the New York Times on January 2, 1930:

“Mackay's Son Takes Job. He will learn the business from the bottom. Had worked in engineering department. Young Mackay was educated at Brown School of Tutoring and graduated from the Canterbury School. Later he took a business course at Dr. Frederick L. Brown's School. He is a member of the Racquet and Tennis, Piping Rock and Creek clubs.”

Mackay was also known as a sportsman, and bought Patience Island in Narragansett Bay in 1940 for a private home and game preserve.<sup>4</sup> In 1956, he purchased Robins Island:

“Robins Island was changed from a state of tangled undergrowth and hurricane debris under a recently completed two-year program. Mr. Mackay had effected a similar transformation of Patience Island in Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay after World War II.”<sup>5</sup>

### Criterion C

Character-defining features include the complex massing of the 2.5-story limestone house which has a steeply pitched slate roof and prominent chimneys; a variety of windows with stone surrounds, including many arranged in rows of three to four multi-paned casement sash, bay windows, dormer and wall dormer windows; and other details such as a dove cote of a secondary wing, and half timbering. On the interior, the house retains carved bannisters and newel post of the main staircase; exposed ceiling beams and a number of fireplaces, at least one angled into a corner and surrounded by ceramic tiles; paneled double doors, wainscoting and walls of the library; one bedroom with crown molding, fireplace and a circular staircase of carved wood bannisters leading to a second level. The c. mid-1950s sale brochure for the property notes “random width oak floors put down with pegs.”<sup>6</sup>

The property also retains the flagstone entry court, paved patio with sunken fountain, swimming pool, and mature landscaping. The property once included a barn, dog run, garage, kennel and stable, some of which remain on other parcels.<sup>7</sup>

Brothers John W. and Eliot Cross formed a partnership in 1907. As described in a review of *New York Transformed: The Architecture of Cross & Cross* by Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker:

The architects Cross & Cross shaped the streetscape and skyline of New York City in the 1920s and 1930s with Upper East Side townhouses and apartment buildings, the RCA Victor Building, and Tiffany's flagship store on 57th Street.

Working through a period of American history that saw dramatic change, from luxurious apartment buildings during the economic boom of the 1920s, to federal commissions during the Depression, the brothers John and Eliot Cross were masters of their craft. Well-connected society men who also showed remarkable foresight in

business, Cross & Cross supported their practice with a partnered real estate firm and played a vital role in residential developments like Sutton Place along the East River.

Cross & Cross oversaw the development of handsome clubs and houses throughout New York City, including the Links Club and the Upper East Side houses of Lewis Spencer Morris and George Whitney. They designed country houses in exclusive residential pockets outside New York—the Southampton estate of Winterthur founder Henry Francis du Pont; houses on the North Shore of Long Island, and in Greenwich, Connecticut; the childhood home of Sister Parish in Far Hills, New Jersey; and the Shelburne, Vermont home of J. Watson and Electra Webb.<sup>8</sup>

Christopher Gray summarized the firm’s work in the *New York Times* on February 7, 2014:

They put their Ivy League and Beaux-Arts connections into play in 1907, and quickly gained a practice in discreet townhouses, clubs, country houses and jewel-like banks. . . . But the sumptuous illustrations also show an unexpected aspect of their career in the late 1920s, as they developed a specialty of flashy skyscrapers in devoutly modernistic style, a form generally eschewed by the old-boy gentility of the architectural profession.

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- 1 “Roslyn, Long Island” brochure for the sale of Happy House in 1950s; “When Happy House was for sale,” Old Long Island. [www.oldlongisland.com/2010/01/when-happy-house-was-for-sale.html](http://www.oldlongisland.com/2010/01/when-happy-house-was-for-sale.html).
  - 2 “Harbor Hill The End Of The Line Of Gilded Age Hauteur And Hurt,” <http://mrmhadams.typepad.com/blog/2014/04/harbor-hill-the-end-of-the-line-of-gilded-age-hauteur-and-hurt-part-vii.html>
  - 3 [www.trinityroslyn.org/history](http://www.trinityroslyn.org/history)
  - 4 <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=9C06E0DE1731E23ABC4F51DFB566838B659EDE>
  - 5 *New York Times*, [/www.nytimes.com/1956/04/03/archives/mackay-buys-robins-island-in-suffolk-tract-of-450-acres-valued-at.htm](http://www.nytimes.com/1956/04/03/archives/mackay-buys-robins-island-in-suffolk-tract-of-450-acres-valued-at.htm); and Page 69, 10-19, 1958,
  - 6 “Roslyn, Long Island” brochure; [www.oldlongisland.com/2010/01/when-happy-house-was-for-sale.html](http://www.oldlongisland.com/2010/01/when-happy-house-was-for-sale.html).
  - 7 Ibid.
  - 8 [www.amazon.com/New-York-Transformed-Architecture-Cross/dp/1580933807](http://www.amazon.com/New-York-Transformed-Architecture-Cross/dp/1580933807)