

## **Summary Paragraph**

Built *circa* 1887, the Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza House is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century townhouse located on a .032 acre parcel at 343.5 Eighth Street, in the Hamilton Park Historic District of Jersey City, New Jersey. [1] The western-most house in a bookmatched pair of Neo Grec-Italianate, eclectic townhouses, the three-story townhouse was originally a single-family, five-bedroom, four-bathroom home, with an entry portico, two-story bay window, and a fenced in front areaway as well as back yard.

In the late 1920's, the home was purchased by Cesario & Justina Barroso, the grandparents of Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza. [2] Venus lived at 343.5 Eighth Street intermittently from the time of her birth in 1965 through 1977 and then was her primary residence from 1977 until the time of her death in December of 1988. The first floor kitchen and her third floor bedroom were the primary shooting locations for the 1990 film *Paris is Burning*. *Paris is Burning* was released to critical acclaim and numerous awards including the Sundance Grand Jury Prize and GLADD Media Award. In 2016, the documentary feature was added to the National Film Registry. [3]

Venus would not live to see any of it. She succumbed to violence in December 1988, a fate for many transwomen then and today. [4] 343.5 Eighth Street in Jersey City is the site of a historic shift in public awareness for the Trans, particularly Trans People of Color, Ballroom, and LGBTQ communities and its preservation critical for future generations as few sites of this magnitude remain in this area. The house is in good condition and has undergone relatively few exterior alterations since it's construction and since Venus resided there.

## **Narrative Description**

The Hamilton Park Historic District in Jersey City, New Jersey, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (1979), the New Jersey State Register (1978), and is locally designated (1977). [5] Centered on its namesake park, the district runs with a northern border at Tenth Street, an eastern border along the rear property lines of Manila Avenue, a southern border at Sixth Street, and a western border at Brunswick Street with a period of significance from 1800 to 1929.

Along Eighth Street, the block between Monmouth and Brunswick Streets is a *mélange* of varying styles. Immediately west of Monmouth, on both sides of Eighth Street, there are a series of six and a series of eight wood frame, vernacular Italianate houses with front porches constructed pre-1873. Further west, along the south side of Eighth Street, are later two and three-story masonry townhouses and small scale apartment buildings constructed between 1873 and 1890. [6]

The Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza House at 343.5 Eighth Street was locally designated within the Hamilton Park Historic District on February 1, 1977, as well as on the on the National and State Registers of Historic Places on January 25, 1979. [7] The building is a three-story with raised basement, two-bay, rectangular-plan, flat-roof, bookmatched, Neo Grec-Italianate influenced, eclectic brick townhouse constructed *circa* 1887. It has a heavy wood dentilated cornice above a paneled frieze. The third and second-story bays contain one-over-one, double-hung-sash, wood windows with stone lintels and sills. The westernmost first-story and basement-level bays are comprised of a three-sided, wood-frame, painted bay window, that projects above a brick

foundation. The window is topped with a crest on a hipped roof and an entablature with dentils; a second entablature containing a decorative paneled frieze (that corresponds with the cornice) and dentils, separates the first and basement level windows. The central bay at each story contains a one-over-one, double-hung-sash, wood window and the side bays contain one-light, fixed, wood windows. The main entry is comprised of a reconstructed, brownstone stoop, as well as one-light, four-paneled, replacement wood door below a one-light, dentilated transom. The stoop, railing, fence, gates, as well as the front areaway and curb of 343 and 343.5 Eighth Street were reconstructed circa 2019 based on historic site and photographic evidence. A photograph attached to property's tax card of 1938 shows the dwelling with a decorative wood entrance portico that has since been removed; however, the building retains the majority of its character-defining features including the cornice, lintels and sills, and the two-story, projecting bay window.

### **Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph**

The Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza House is locally significant under Criterion B for its close, seventy plus year association with Venus and the Pellagatti family (192? – 1994). Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza was born at Margaret Hague Maternity Hospital in Jersey City to parents of Puerto Rican and Italian descent. She spent her entire life in Jersey City, attending local churches and public schools and began developing her identity at local Jersey City LGBTQ friendly clubs, although during the late seventies, such terminology did not exist. In late 1985, Venus was approached by director Jennie Livingston and offered the opportunity to appear in a documentary film called *Paris is Burning* that chronicled Ball Culture and the African-American, Latino, gay and transgender communities involved in it. She accepted the offer and her interviews for the film were conducted at her home at 343.5 Eighth Street.

Thirty-four years after her death, her legacy lives on through her quotes from the film, which illustrated a searing desire for normalcy and acceptance, while sitting in her bedroom. Most of the documentation from the period of significance will bring up images of Venus posed near the window or laying across her bed in one of the few places that provided her with the safety to be herself. Although the film provides a powerful and lasting snapshot into this world, it is not a tangible one. An individual historical designation for 343.5 Eighth Street that anchors Venus's images for future generations will provide much needed accuracy, healing, and hope.

### **Narrative Statement of Significance**

Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza spent her entire life in Jersey City. The fourth child of John T Pellagatti [8] and Olga (Ollie) Barroso Pellagatti,[9] her birth was preceded by her older brothers John Jr. (September of 1960), Joseph (August 1961) and Frank (July 1963) all of whom were born in Jersey City.

In response to high infant mortality rates in Hudson County, which peaked at 212 per 1,000 births in 1923, [10] the Margaret Hague Maternity Hospital was constructed as part of the Jersey City Medical Center [11] between 1928 and 1931, with the goal of being the best maternity hospital of its time. Between its opening in 1931 and its closure in 1979, more than 350,000 babies of record were delivered there, including New Jersey Governor James McGreevey, Martha Stewart, as well as two of Frank Sinatra's children, were delivered at the hospital. [12]

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1965 **[13]** Venus Pellagatti Xtravaganza was born at the Margaret Hague and then taken to her home on Eighth Street just over a mile away.

The Pellagatti's were a working-class, lower-income family that depended on each other as well as their extended family for support. Most of Venus's aunts, uncles and cousins lived on Eighth Street or within walking distance on other surrounding blocks. Venus originally moved into a house with her parents and brothers at 350 Eighth Street, on the north or "Italian side of the block", diagonally across from her grandmother's house at 343.5 which was on the south or "Puerto Rican side of the block". In her early years, Venus was often in the care of her grandmother at 343.5 Eighth Street while her father worked at his older brother's linoleum store, Leo's **[14]** Linoleum on Newark Ave between Brunswick and Monmouth Streets, and her mother worked odd jobs or ran errands for the family.

Both sides of Venus's family were devout Catholics and attended church regularly at Holy Rosary Church on Sixth Street, **[15]** **[16]** which still provides services to the community. Venus began pre-school at Holy Rosary at age four and continued there through first grade. It was around this time that her parents' marriage started to fall apart and they would eventually separate. Venus moved to Seventh Street right across from the entrance to the Holy Rosary School with her mother and brothers while her father moved back to Third Street. She spent one year, second grade, at PS 37 before her mother remarried and moved to 21 Winfield Ave in Jersey City NJ and at that point Venus would attend Ezra Nolan Middle School, PS #40, for third through eighth grades. **[17]** During this time, she was allowed to ride the #9 Bus regularly, from Gates Ave to Newark Avenue and Brunswick Street, to visit her father, grandmother and other family members on Eighth Street.

Winfield Avenue is where the family first started to notice changes in Venus. Her brothers would often catch her putting on make-up or wearing women's clothes. During this time Venus also confided in her grandmother, who was supportive and would allow her to dress up at her home 343.5 Eighth Street. As Venus was finishing seventh grade, she knew living with her grandmother full time was the only way to truly pursue her true identity. By 1977, in eighth grade, Venus was living full time at her grandmothers.

343.5 Eighth Street was always a hive of activity for the Pellagatti's with their grandmother hosting all holidays, birthday parties and at least one family dinner a week. Venus and her grandmother grew very close but she also started to develop friendships with other LGBTQ kids in the neighborhood. At first, they would gather at 343.5 Eighth Street or another friend's house on Seventh Street, get dressed up, play records or just hang out, but eventually they got up enough courage to attend local clubs. Venus's brother Frankie would sometimes join and he confided to her that he was gay. One of the clubs they would frequent was called The Capri Lounge located on Christopher Columbus Drive between Barrow and Grove Streets. **[18]** The Capri was largely a Hispanic dance club that was accepting of LGBTQ patrons where Venus was free to dress as she liked and often did so. The roots of her ballroom connections, specifically to the Xtravaganza's was formed with these friends, in the neighborhood and at these clubs.

Venus's grandmother had always been supportive of her identity and her participation in ballroom, so much so that she would attend balls with Venus in the city. In 1985, while attending one of those balls with her grandmother at the then "Gay and Lesbian Center" on 13<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, Venus would meet Jennie Livingston, the director of *Paris Is Burning*. Jennie was at the event doing research for the documentary. She was later quoted about that night: ***"The one person who was there that I met was Venus; she was there with her biological grandmother competing, and I just remember having my mind blown."*** [19] Venus would agree to participate in what would become *Paris is Burning* and film with Jennie on a number of occasions between 1985 and 1988.

Venus was well known throughout the ball community in New York, but never left Jersey City and would continue to frequent clubs and balls there. Her grandmother would allow ballroom friends to visit or stay at the house, 343.5 Eighth Street, even after Venus would sneak some of them in. Angie Xtravaganza, was one of the friends who would frequently visit. It was Angie who would eventually inform Venus' grandmother of her death. [20]

It is not known exactly when Venus started sex work, however her family and friends suggest it was in her mid to late teens. Many would try to talk her out of it including her brothers and Angie but to no avail. [21] There were not many, if any, employment opportunities for trans women in the eighties and sex work was often the only option for survival. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1988 Venus would meet with a client in New York City near Times Square. It is not known if the client was new or someone that had prior contact with her. After their encounter and while still in the hotel room the man bound Venus' hands behind her back and strangled her to death. He then threw a mattress over her body and left. Venus would remain in the room until she was discovered on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1988 at approximately 1pm in the afternoon by a maid at the hotel who "noticed" an odor. [22] Through personal items that were found in the room, the police were able to make initial contact with Angie Xtravaganza, who was then able to put them in contact with Venus' grandmother. Venus's father and brother John were the ones who identified her body at the medical examiner's office.

Venus was buried in a family plot with her grandfather Cesario at the Holy Cross Cemetery in North Arlington New Jersey on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1988 and her grandmother would join them a little over a year later. Prior to her death in March of 1990, Venus's grandmother maintained all of her personal items in her bedroom as if Venus had never left. 343.5 Eighth Street would become part of the estate and be sold in August of 1994 to Kenneth Lapham, who still owns the property today. Venus's belongings were passed to a family member and later destroyed in a house fire; 343.5 Eighth Street is significant under Criterion B as the only extant, tangible, historical connection to Venus's life still is 343.5 Eighth Street, Jersey City NJ.

***Michael Roberson is a respected educator, advocate and leader within the LGBTQ community. Mr. Roberson is a professor at New School University in NY, a Scholar in Residence for the Center for Race, created the Federation of Ballroom Houses and was an advisor for the television series POSE. A Brief Introduction of Ballroom as curated by Michael Roberson in support of this designation application is below.***

### A brief introduction to Ballroom.

The Africa-American Harlem Renaissance writer and poet, Zora Neal Hurston stated once “black women are the mules of the earth”. One assertion is that black trans women are historically and theologically situated somewhere between Howard Thurman’s notion of “the disinherited” and Franz Fanon’s notion of “the wretched of the earth”. In a contemporary context, transgender, lesbian, bisexual and gay African-American men and women must overcome complex challenges to establish and secure welcoming and nourishing communities. While we may already be connected with multiple social groups, our membership in these groups is almost always conditional and tenuous. This constant marginalization sustains the community’s burdens of stigma, violence, housing insecurity, and HIV infection rates, which are estimated to be among the highest of any community in the U.S. One response to this marginalization has been the formation of self-sustaining social networks and cultural groups, such as the House | Ballroom scene, a Black/LatinX LGBT artistic collective and intentional kinship system that has grown over the past 50 years with its roots stemming from the Harlem Renaissance out of the Harlem Drag Ball Circuit. Then in 1967, a black trans-woman, Crystal, critiqued racism and colorism in the drag pageant circuit. And out of the critique, the Drag Ball Circuit morphs into the House/ball circuit, as Crystal has a ball and then forms the very 1st house, the house of Labelija, named after her. From the late 1960's, the very 1st mothers of the modern house/ball community, Peppa Labelija, Dorien Corey, Paris Dupree, Avis Pendavis, and Dutchess LaWong began creating houses, out of Harlem and Brooklyn, as they are referred to as the freedom fighters of the community. Through the 1970's more houses began to be formed, black and latinx gay men participating in, such as Erskin Chrtsian, David Padilla, Junior Labelija, and holding power by creating houses, such as Ruben Rivers, who creates the House of Chanel in 1976, and Larry and Richard, who creates the House of Ebony in 1978. As the 1980's rolled around, and the community is not only being confronted by societal white supremacy and communal homophobia, but is emblematically confronted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and this would have deadly impact on the house/ball community.

It is out of this crisis, that in 1982, the House of Xtravaganza is formed by David and Angie, and as such, ushers large numbers of the LatinX folk in the house/ball community. It is here, where in 1985, Venus is introduced to the house/ball community through being asked to join the house of Xtravaganza through the founding Mother Angie, who also becomes Venus' mother. Her presence is so vital and important not only as Latinx Trans-woman, but also because she resided in Jersey City, New Jersey, as the 1980's are also a time where houses were being created in New Jersey, such as the house of Grace and Leviticus. And these houses opened the door for more Jersey houses to be formed, such as the Houses of Jordan, Saint Claire, Richards, and the likes to be created later in the 1980's and the early 1990's.

## **Timeline of Events & Photos**

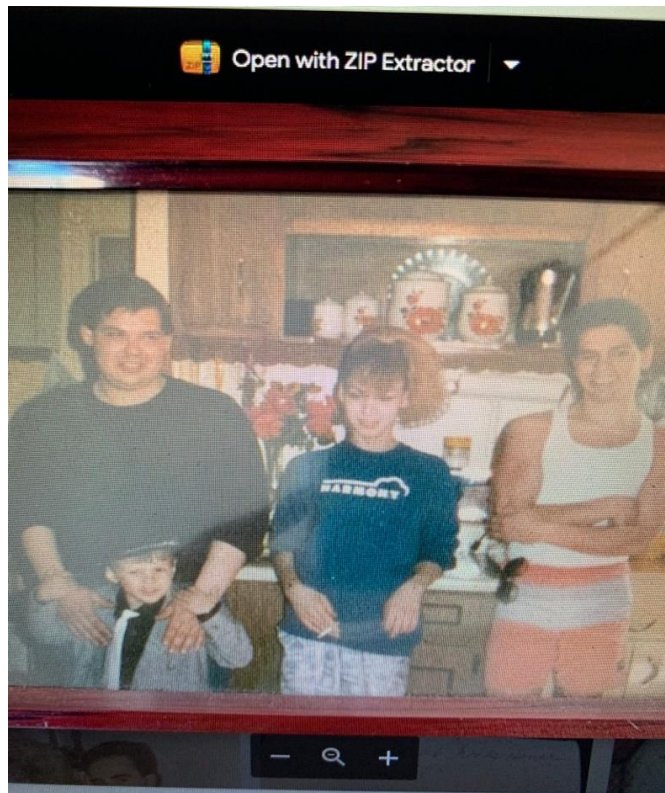
### ***Events leading up to and at 343.5 Eighth Street.***

- 1894** Venus grandfather Cesario Barroso born in Galicia Spain 6.9.1894
- 1911** Venus grandmother Justina Sallicrup born in Coamo Puerto Rico 8.8.1911
- \*\***Justina & Cesario purchased 343.5 in late 1920s or early 1930's
- 1932** Venus Father John T Pellagatti born 1.15 1932 in bathroom at 306 3<sup>rd</sup> St. JC, NJ
- 1940** Venus Mother Olga Barroso Born 8.26,1940 in bathroom at 343.5 Eighth St. JC, NJ
- 1949** – Cesario dies May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1949 in Jersey City NJ
- 1959** – John & Olga married in Jersey City NJ / Move to Eighth Street across from 343 Justina on the "Italian side"
- 1960** – John Pellagatti Jr, Born 9.15.1960
- 1960-1990** Justina regularly holds family parties and nightly dinners at 343.5 / Kids regularly stay at 343.5 due to parents work schedules.
- 1961** – Joseph Pellagatti, Born 8.28.1961
- 1963** – Frank Pellagatti, Born 8.8.1963
- 1965** – Venues Pellagatti, Born May 1965 at Margaret Hague Maternity Hospital
- 1967** – First known photos of Venus taken at 343.5 Eighth Street in back yard
- 1969** – Louie Pellagatti Born 3.20.1969
- 1977** – Venus moves into 343.5 full time because Justina accepts her identity.
- 1986** – Pictures of Venus at 343.5 Eighth Street family party in kitchen and living room.
- 1986 -1988** *Paris is Burning* Interviews and photos shot at 343.5
- 1988** – Venus murdered December 1988 in NYC
- 1988** – Venus interred at Holy Cross Cemetery North Arlington NJ
- 1990** – Justina dies on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1990 Jersey City NJ, interred with Venus
- 1994** – 343.5 Eighth Street sold by Justina estate to Kenneth Lapham 8.21.1994
- 1994** – Kenneth Lapham takes photos of property before renovating.
- 2022** – Kenneth Lapham currently owns 343.5 Eighth Street.

Earliest Photos of Venus at 343.5. These were taken in the back yard between 1966-1967  
Venus on left and alone below:



Venus at family party in kitchen and living room 1986. \*\*Cabinetry and paneling will match later photos from current owner. Venus and her brothers in kitchen



Playing with puppet at family party 1986





***Paris is Burning* Images 1986-1988. Most famous image from house is first one. \*\*Elements of these will also match later photos from current owner.**





**Photos taken by Kenneth Lapham in August of 1994 soon after purchase and before reno.  
Sticker on blue heater and paneling above stove match Venus cooking shots**



Molding around bottom cabinets and shelving cut out match pic of Venus with brothers.



Venus bedroom shot in 1994. Venus room is back to the left with woman in it. Paneling and heaters match *Paris is Burning* images.



**Backyard in 1994. Fence where Venus picture was taken is lower right.**





**Earliest Picture of Venus's Mom Olga with her father, Cesario holding her in 1940. This is believed to have been taken at 343.5 Eighth Street.**



## Citations

1. NJ Parcels, public records. 343.5 Eighth Street, Jersey City, Block 9908 Lot 18
2. TBD Jersey City public records
3. Library of Congress, Complete National Film Registry Listing 2016
4. City of NY Vital Records Certificate, Certificate of Death 156-88-121418, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988, as Thomas Pellagatti
5. Hamilton Park Historic District original designation report 1979
6. Designation Analysis by Professor Henry Russel Hitchcock. 1979 Designation Report p. 5
7. Hamilton Park Historic District original designation report (P. 45 & P. 119)
8. John T Pellagatti, 1940 United States Census Report, Hudson County, Ward 3, aggregated by Thomas Flynn on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1940
9. Olga (Bassario) Pellagatti, 1940 United States Census Report, TBD
10. New Jersey City University, Jersey City Past and Present, July 27, 2021
11. Jersey Medical Center Historical Designation Application 1985
12. New Jersey City University, Jersey City Past and Present, July 27, 2021
13. City of NY Vital Records Certificate, Certificate of Death 156-88-121418, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988, as Thomas Pellagatti
14. Leo Pellagatti, 1940 Census Report United States Census Report, Hudson County, Ward 3, aggregated by Thomas Flynn on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1940
15. Frank Pellagatti NJ Obits 2005 funeral at Holy Rosary
16. Olga Pellagatti NJ Obits 2010 funeral at Holy Rosary
17. Ezra Nolan Middle School Classmates.com as Thomas Pellagatti
18. The Capri Lounge: A Family Owned Business, by Anthony Apruzzese, May 2, 2014
19. Jennie Livingston, "Touch This Skin Darling, *Paris is Burning* Turns 30" by Daniella Lagaccia, Refinery29, Article September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020,
20. PIB Documentary 1990, Angie of Venus death 1:08:53
21. PIB Documentary 1990, Angie of Venus death 1:08:37
22. NYPD Criminal Complaint Number 32656, Exceptional Closure Document, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1990