

17 EAST 128TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built circa 1864.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1753, Lot 10.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 17 East 128th Street House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses, including the owner of the property, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Four letters were received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The 17 East 128th Street House is one of a few surviving frame houses in Harlem which date from the period in the city's history when Harlem was still a rural village and not legally part of the City of New York. Constructed circa 1864, this house was once one of many similarly styled framed houses that were built in Harlem at roughly that same time, particularly between 110th Street and 130th Street. Although its architect is unknown, the house exemplifies a pleasing synthesis of Second Empire and Italianate elements. Among its more prominent features are a polychromatic, slate covered, mansard roof and a covered porch which runs the width of the facade at the parlor floor level. The 17 East 128th Street House derives its significance primarily from the fact that it has managed to survive, remarkably intact, until today.

Harlem: History and Development

The area of New York City presently known as Harlem embraces generally the region of Manhattan above Central Park. The first settlement in this area occurred in 1636. In 1658, Peter Stuyvesant established the town of NieuwHaarlem in the vicinity and named it in fond recollection of the city of Haarlem in Holland.

From its founding, through the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century, Harlem retained its rural character. The flat eastern portion of the area, blessed with lush soil, was placed under cultivation and brought prosperity and wealth to its farmers. In the western half of Harlem, some of New York's most illustrious families, including the Delanceys, Bleockers, Rikers, Beekmans and Hamiltons, maintained large estates which exploited the magnificent views that Harlem Heights proffered. For approximately two hundred years, the Village of Harlem remained remarkably stable and fairly small. In the 1820s, for example, a mere 91 families resided there.¹

In the 1830s, Harlem's stability was shaken when the town suffered a decline which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. Harlem's once fertile farmland, worn out by decades of cultivation, lost its former productivity.² As a result, many of its great estates were put up for public auction and the farmlands were sold at bargain prices. The area was sought by those desiring cheap property and housing, including many newly-arrived and destitute immigrants to whom the once productive soil seemed less forbidding. At midcentury, Harlem, with its still unspoiled countryside and striking vistas, retained its essentially rural, small town feel. Consisting of farm houses interspersed among scattered shantytowns, Harlem boasted a population of



roughly 1500.³

In spite of Harlem's decline, its potential as a residential suburb for New York City did not go unnoticed. However, remoteness from city life was the single greatest obstacle to Harlem's development as a residential community.⁴ Although the New York and Harlem Railroad ran trains from lower Manhattan to 129th Street after 1837, the trip was long and the service poor. Stage lines which were in operation after the 1830s were even less reliable than the railroad. After 1856, steamboat service was available but only during the warmer months. Such an unreliable transportation system obviously was incapable of encouraging settlement in Harlem.

As the population of New York City continued to swell after the Civil War, mounting development pressures which pushed residential neighborhoods further northward began to affect the status of nearby Harlem. Harlem expanded slowly during the 1860s. However, it was not until after Harlem was annexed to New York City in 1873 that development began in earnest. The real impetus for new residential development there came with the arrival of three lines of the elevated railroad which, by the late 1870s, ran as far north as 129th Street. This form of transportation precipitated a building boom in Harlem which lasted until 1905 and transformed the previously quiet village into one of New York's most fashionable neighborhoods.

Practically all of the houses that stand in Harlem today were built during this building boom. Exclusive houses, such as those on Strivers' Row in the St. Nicholas Historic District, helped establish Harlem as a center of fashion and elegance. The area also boasted more modest brownstones, the popular Polo Grounds, and the distinguished Harlem Opera House.

History of the Property

The building boom proved to be a veritable gold mine for real estate speculators who managed to reap tremendous profits by buying and re-selling land in the area. The dramatic price increases for real estate prompted one old-timer to lament in 1889:⁵

When I see the prices real estate is now bringing in Harlem it makes me feel that I was a fool for not making...investments years ago when property was so cheap. Twenty years [ago] the meadow lands of Harlem were not considered worth paying taxes for...

One of the earliest of these investors was Abraham Overhiser. In 1836, he acquired a parcel of land consisting of seven lots on tax map block 1753 (then 513) between East 128th Street and East 129th Street. Previously, these lots had been owned by Charles Henry Hall who had purchased them in 1825 as part of a larger parcel of land. During the eighteenth century, these lots comprised portions of two separate farms, those of John Adriance and Abraham Meyer. In 1835, Hall sold a large portion of his holdings to Francis Fickett, who, nine months later, sold smaller parcels to willing buyers. Overhiser purchased lots 9-12 and 16-62 for the total price of \$3,809. He proceeded to take up residence on the East 129th Street frontage of his property and maintained his home there until the 1860s when he began to divest himself of individual lots. By 1864, he had conveyed all of those lots to others.

According to both real property tax records as well as conveyance records, Lot 10, the site of the 17 East 128th Street House, had not been improved when Overhiser sold the property. However, they do imply that, by 1865, some improvements had been placed on the lot. In that year, the assessed property valuation for real estate

tax purposes had jumped nearly 500 percent, to \$2,200, from the previous year's valuation. Moreover, in 1865, Samuel M. Brown, who had purchased Lot 10 from Overhiser for \$1,125 in 1864, sold the property to one James Beach of Throgs Neck, Westchester for \$5,900, and increase of nearly 525 percent of his original cost for the property. These enormous increases in assessed valuation and in cost indicate that some improvement, probably the present house, was placed on this lot in late 1864 or early 1865. Moreover, the design of the structure, its detailing, and the type of building materials used in its construction indicate that the house at 17 East 128th Street had to have been built at roughly this time.⁶

Unfortunately, it is difficult to attribute this house to a specific builder, much less an architect. While city directories of the period list Overhiser's occupation as a carpenter, no evidence exists to justify the conclusion that he built this house. Likewise, no information concerning Samuel M. Brown has come to light.

James Beach resided in the house until 1874 when he conveyed title to the property to Hannah Van Reed for \$11,000. She owned the property along with her husband, Jacob, for roughly 12 years. Little is known about the Van Reeds.

In 1886, Viola H. Banning, the wife of Hubert A. Banning, an attorney who maintained an office in the City Hall area of lower Manhattan, purchased the property for \$12,000. It remained in the Banning family for some forty years. By 1916, Mrs. Banning had been widowed. In that year, she conveyed title to the property to King C. Gillette of Santa Monica, California, for \$100. Both the amount of money involved and the Gillette's place of residence suggest that this conveyance amounted to little more than an arrangement of convenience whereby Mrs. Banning retained her residence at 17 East 128th Street. The fact that she is listed in directories as the Treasurer of the Gillette Clipping Machine Company,⁷ of which King C. Gillette was presumably the owner, lends further credibility to this theory. Moreover, Gillette conveyed the property back to the Banning family in 1917 for \$1.00. Mrs. Banning's son, Hubert, a lawyer, and his wife, Anna Olga, took title to the property and, according to directories, all three resided there.

In 1926, Hubert and Anna Banning drew up a Deed of Trust and named Palmer A. Brooks as trustee. Now residing in Germany, the Bannings worked out an agreement whereby Mr. Brooks was given the authority to dispose of the property upon the death of Viola Banning. Mrs. Banning, who by now was listed in directories as the President of the Gillette Clipping Machine Company, evidently passed away in 1926 or 1927 for in 1927 Brooks arranged for the disposition of the property.

In that year, Margaret Lane purchased the property for \$12,000 from Mr. Brooks. Seven years later she conveyed the property to Louis and May Seeley for \$1.00. Again, the amount of money involved in the transaction suggests some arrangement between Lane and the Seeleys. Indeed, when Mr. Seeley, at the age of 90, sold the property in 1979, he told the buyer that he had inherited the property from his nanny. Evidently Margaret Lane was his nanny.

The current owner of the 17 East 128th Street House, Carolyn Adams, is a woman of considerable prominence both in her profession as well as within the Harlem community. A native of Harlem, Ms. Adams has distinguished herself as a dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. She is renowned for the numerous roles which have been choreographed especially for her and is considered to rank among the best interpreters of Paul Taylor's approach to modern dance. Now retired from active performing with the company, Ms. Adams is a director of the Harlem Dance Studio, the teaching arm of the Harlem Dance Foundation, where she performs, teaches, and lectures. Along with other

members of her family. Ms. Adams is active in various projects, including preservation, aimed at fostering community pride among the residents of Harlem.

All in all, the house at 17 East 128th Street has been occupied by essentially five families since the time of its construction. This fact undoubtedly helps to account for the remarkably intact state of the house today.

Second Empire Style

Architecture of the post-Civil War period, although still based on historical precedent, represents a reaction to a previous pre-war attitude in which an archaeological perspective assumed a prominent position. At mid-century, this focus resulted in an architectural expression which is best described as "picturesque." As the fascination with the past evolved from blind infatuation to a more distanced sobriety, architects, though continuing to emphasize the picturesque, began to stress a freer adaptation of precedent. This relaxed attitude enabled architects, who were still attempting to evoke the spirit of the past, to divorce themselves from a slavish imitation of the past, allowed them to experiment and permitted them to exercise a greater degree of creativity. Architecture of the post-Civil War period can justifiably be characterized by an emphasis on both the picturesque and on eclecticism at the same time.

Among the bewildering modes of architectural expression which manifested themselves as a result of this combined eclectic and picturesque sensibility was the Second Empire style. Popular in the 1860s and the early 1870s, it exhibits a refreshing degree of imagination. The style takes its name from the French Second Empire, the name given to the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870). Directly or indirectly, American architects were influenced by the design of the architectural showpiece of Napoleon's reign the addition to the Louvre (1852-1857). This project popularized a roof form developed by seventeenth-century French architect Francois Mansart. The mansard roof, a double pitched roof with a steep lower slope, became the hallmark of the Second Empire style. Adoption of the mansard roof was not merely a stylistic gesture, but was also a utilitarian improvement: by increasing head room in the attic space, it provided for an additional floor of usable living space. Nearly every mansard roof is pierced with dormer windows which provide light on the floor. The slope of the roof varies greatly from building to building but the majority form straight angles although others have concave or convex curves. In almost every case the roof is clearly delineated from the mass of the building by a bracketed cornice.

One of the first major buildings in America designed in the Second Empire style was the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. Designed by James Renwick, the Corcoran set the style for many post-Civil War public buildings. In New York City, both the first Grand Central Depot and the Post Office at the foot of City Hall Park (both now demolished) were among the many imposing structures to utilize this style.

Second Empire buildings feature, besides the mansard roof, prominent projecting and receding surfaces often in the form of central and end pavilions. Ornamentation usually includes classical pediments, balustrades, and windows flanked by columns or pilasters. Paired columns usually support entablatures that divide the floors of the building. The general effect is one of ornate monumentality.

Domestic architecture in the Second Empire style is more difficult to characterize because the mansard roof was often placed on any house in order to create a contemporary look without necessitating any innovations in plan or ornament. Any house with a mansard roof is generally termed Second Empire regardless of what decorative features adorn the facade.⁸

In New York City, the architect-builder, like those in other large American cities, adapted the style to contemporary rowhouse forms, construction materials, and local workmen's skills. Usually, this merely meant adding a mansard roof above a cornice line of an otherwise Italianate brownstone rowhouse.⁹ In Harlem, which was still very much a small town, architect-builders adapted the style to frame Italianate dwellings like that at 17 East 128th Street and continued the local tradition of the elevated parlor floor and stoop with balustrade railing. Photographs dating from the early twentieth century indicate that frame Second Empire/Italianate dwellings of this sort were fairly common in Harlem especially between 110th Street and 130th Street, but today very few survive.

Architectural Description

The house at 17 East 128th Street is a two-and-one-half-story, three bay, frame house which sits on an elevated brick basement. A wooden stoop rises to a porch which is situated at the parlor floor level where the original entrance and floor-length parlor windows survive in place. This unusual porch, or veranda, is actually a narrow wooden deck enclosed by an Italianate railing with turned balusters. The veranda's metal canopy is not supported by posts, but rather, rests on four gracefully curved wooden brackets. A long row of arched gingerbread pendants runs the length of the canopy forming a decorative border along its eave.

The entrance is composed of a pair of matching, black, double-leaf Italianate doors which are capped by a three-paned Venetian window. The doors and windows are set into a round-arched, panelled door surround which is further embellished with a keystone. The details, with the exception of the door, are painted red.

The fenestration at the parlor floor is characterized by wooden two-over-four, double-hung windows. At the second floor, three, two-over-two, double-hung windows pierce the facade. All the windows are set into wooden architrave enframements which, in turn, are capped with molded wooden lintels. Narrow wooden clapboards, painted green, cover the remaining areas of the facade.

The composition of the facade is terminated with a roof treatment which includes, in succession, a wooden frieze, a wooden cornice boasting large, modillion blocks and a polychromatic, slate-covered, mansard roof. Set into the mansard are three, round-arched, double-hung windows, each of which is enframed by a peaked roof dormer.

Located on the north side of East 128th Street between Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue in the heart of Harlem and set among later rows of brownstone houses and tenements, the 17 East 128th Street House remains a residence for members of the Harlem community. Built circa 1864 in the Second Empire Style, this frame dwelling is representative of other similarly styled houses that were built in Harlem immediately after the Civil War and prior to Harlem's transformation from a rural town into a fashionable urban neighborhood of New York City. In remarkably intact condition, it is one of an increasingly scarce number of frame houses still extant in Harlem as well as in Manhattan.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem, The Making of A Ghetto: Negro New York 1890-1930 (2nd ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 71-72.
2. Ibid., p. 73.
3. Susan Elizabeth Lyman, The Story of New York: An Informal History of the City From the First Settlement to the Present Day (Rev. ed.; New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1975), pp. 147-148.
4. Osofsky, p. 74.
5. Ibid., p. 76.
6. Buildings Department records, which are usually the primary source for this information, were not maintained until 1866. No records for this property appear at the Buildings Department until 1904, when an unsafe building notice (U.B.) was issued.
7. Located at 129 West 31st Street, the Gillette Clipping Machine Company, manufactured "clipping and grooming machinery for domestic animals." See H. Wilson, Trow's General Directory of the Boroughs of Manhattan and Bronx, City of New York, 1920/21 (New York: John F. Trow, Publisher, 1921).
8. John Poppeliers, S. Allen Chambers and Nancy B. Schwartz, What Style is it? (Washington, D.C. The Preservation Press, n.d.), p. 23.
9. Charles Lockwood, Bricks and Brownstone: The New York City Row House, 1783-1929: An Architectural and Social History (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1972), p. 163.
10. See photographs in the collections of the New-York Historical Society and the New York Public Library.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 17 East 128th Street House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 17 East 128th Street House is a rare specimen of the many, once common, Second Empire frame dwellings constructed in Harlem, especially between 110th Street and 130th Street, after the Civil War; that it is one among an increasingly scarce number of frame structures still extant in Manhattan; that the design is characteristic of the picturesque and eclectic qualities that exemplify post-Civil War architecture and the Second Empire style, that the house displays such significant architectural features as a polychromatic slate mansard roof, a broad canopy-covered porch, or veranda, at the parlor floor level and an Italianate railing with turned balusters; that it survives, largely intact, as a tangible reminder of the mid-nineteenth century, rural, small-town atmosphere that characterized Harlem immediately prior to its transforma-

tion into a fashionable New York City neighborhood; and that, today, the house remains owned and lived in by residents of the Harlem community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark, the 17 East 128th Street House, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1753, Lot 10, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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1854/55-55/56, 62/63-63/64, 66/67, 84/85-86/87, 1900/01, 1910/11, 1920/21,
1924/25.



17 East 128th Street House

Built: circa 1864