

NOV 19 1976

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 9, 1976, Number 1
LP-0939

17 WEST 16TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built c. 1846.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 818, Lot 25.

On September 14, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 17 West 16th Street House 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. There were no speakers for or against designation. The owner and Community Board 5 have expressed their approval of the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Greek Revival house, built about 1846 in the once fashionable Union Square neighborhood, is one of a row of nine townhouses, four of which survive. The houses were planned and probably built by Edward S. Mesier. No. 17 later housed the famed birth control clinic of Margaret Sanger, the pioneer of family planning in this country.

The site of No. 17 lies within the original boundaries of a farm which belonged to Simon Congo, a free blackman and property owner in 17th-century New York. This parcel of property was later incorporated into the holdings of the highly esteemed landowner Henry Brevoort of the Bowery, a civic leader of New York in his day. The northernmost tract of the Brevoort farm was sold to Thomas and Samuel Burling in 1799 and soon thereafter a section of land (now roughly bounded by Fifth and Sixth Avenues and West 16th and 17th Streets) was purchased by John Cowman from them. This land remained rural up into the 1830s, despite the fact that Fifth and Sixth Avenues were opened to traffic in this area a decade earlier.

"Union Place," later Union Square, one block to the east appears on the New York City Commissioners Map of 1808-1811. It was formed by the unplanned convergence of the Bowery Road (Fourth Avenue), Bloomingdale Road (Broadway), and the wide cross-town artery, 14th Street. The site was at times used as a Potters Field, and as late as 1833 was covered with crude shanties. The new Union Square was an integral part of the city plan to improve the vehicular traffic patterns while providing the amenities of a formal park within the expanding city. After the square was cleared, graded, and paved it was formally opened to the public on July 19, 1839. A handsome row of swell-front townhouses lined the east side of the square above East 15th Street.

The city's rapid urban expansion northward made the Union Square area, then bordering on the city's very limits, a promising section for residential development. By 1839 blocks of fine houses were being built north of 14th Street. These were soon followed by graceful mansions and townhouses constructed for the well-to-do of the City.

It was during this favorable period for residential development that Edward S. Mesier purchased much of the land owned by John Cowman in 1842. This property was previously linked by Burling Lane to a section of the Bowery Road, which had been incorporated into Union Square. Mesier planned to make West 16th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues a first-class residential street. Most of the lots were laid out with twenty-five foot frontages on both sides of the street. The nine lots on the north side closest to the corner house on Fifth Avenue, however, were to be "thirty-three and one third feet wide" with setbacks of "six feet from the street line...with a swell...to extend two feet six inches nearer to the line of the street..." No. 17, one of these nine swell-front houses which were erected in about 1846, was purchased by George S. Fox in April of that year.

The house continued to serve as a private residence for many years and was owned by a series of families. In 1876 the socially prominent Mr. and Mrs. William B. Rice took up residence and lived in the house for many years. The residential character of this block of West 16th Street was retained throughout most of the 19th century although the surrounding neighborhood became increasingly commercial and the fashionable "Ladies Mile" shopping district on Broadway passed directly through Union Square.

In 1930, the pioneer of planned parenthood, Margaret Sanger (1882 [?] -1966), moved her "Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau," which had previously been located at 45 West 15th Street, to 17 West 16th Street. She never lived at No. 17 but resided at 39 Fifth Avenue with her second husband, J. Noah H. Slee, an oil industrialist.

Margaret Sanger's involvement in family planning began sometime after 1912 when she became a nurse. She witnessed the unnecessary pain, the anguish, and the frequent deaths which resulted when women attempted to abort unwanted pregnancies. She studied European birth control methods in 1913 and again in 1914 after a legal dispute with Anthony Comstock, Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. This suit was ultimately settled in her favor. In 1916 she opened her first clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn, only to have it closed down ten days later. Undaunted, she continued her crusade to help expectant mothers and those who wished to prevent pregnancy.

In 1921 Margaret Sanger helped to found the American Birth Control League which became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1946. This led to the establishment of more than 250 Planned Parenthood Centers throughout the United States. In 1923 she opened what has become the oldest permanent planned parenthood clinic in America at 104 Fifth Avenue.

The "Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau" opened its new office at 17 West 16th Street in 1930. Its goal was to help couples establish a healthier and happier family life through planned parenthood and "birth control," a phrase which Margaret Sanger had coined in 1914.

The Margaret Sanger clinic remained at 17 West 16th Street until 1973 when it became a part of the Birth Control Centers of Planned Parenthood of New York City and moved to 380 Second Avenue. There it is known as the Margaret Sanger Center in her memory.

Since the 1920s the neighborhood around West 16th Street has remained a mixed residential and light commercial area. In recent years a number of apartment buildings have been constructed in the area. The present owner of No. 17 has converted this gracious townhouse into a one-family residence once again.

Today, No. 17, a handsome Greek Revival townhouse with swell-front, looks much as it did when it was built about 1846. This variant of the Greek Revival townhouse with swell-front rather than the more typical flat front, was much more prevalent in Boston. The swell-front was first introduced there in houses of the Federal style, and rows of such houses can still be seen in Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill. In New York, this house, with its neighbors at 5-9 West 16th Street, is among the very few survivors of this type. The swell-front gives the front rooms an interesting shape. On West 16th Street the unusual width of the lots, over thirty-three feet, made the swell-front next to the flush section at the doorway, a particularly imposing and gracious feature of the facade.

Another impressive feature of No. 17 is the handsome Greek Revival entranceway. The enframing with eared architrave is subtly accented by a molding, while the frieze and modillioned cornice above are handsomely proportioned. The recessed double doors are framed with a crisp egg-and-dart molding and are flanked by sidelights and surmounted by a three-light transom. This in turn is surmounted by a decorative frieze supporting a rich cornice.

The full-height parlor floor windows are surmounted by cap-molded lintels. These windows open onto a handsome cast-iron balcony incorporating Italianate motifs above a Greek fret. Less ornate railings line the stoop and enclose the front areaway. The second and third floor windows in the swell-front have six-over-six double hung sash, while the windows in the flush portion of the facade are unusually wide with sidelights flanking six-over-six sash. Above a plain fascia, modillions carry the roof cornice.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 17 West 16th 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 West 16th Street House is a handsome Greek Revival townhouse with swell-front, that it is a rare surviving example of this type of house in New York City, that it retains its original residential character, that it once housed the famous Margaret Sanger clinic for family planning, and that it is a reminder of the once fashionable Union Square neighborhood.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 West 16th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 818, Lot 25, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.