

677 LAFAYETTE AVENUE HOUSE (Magnolia Grandiflora), Borough of Brooklyn.
Built 1890; architect L.C. Holden.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 1785, Lot 161 In part.

On May 10, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 677 Lafayette Avenue House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The house at No. 677, which was built in 1890 from designs by the New York architect L.C. Holden, faces the north side of Tompkins Park from Lafayette Avenue. It is located in an area that was formerly the old village of Bedford which had been incorporated into the City of Brooklyn in 1834. The park is one of the original eleven parks or squares in the 1839 Brooklyn city plan. A commission was authorized in 1835 to lay out streets, avenues, and squares in the expanding City of Brooklyn, taking into consideration the proposed suggestions of a Citizens Committee. Tompkins Park was undoubtedly named for Daniel D. Tompkins (1774-1825), Governor of New York State and Vice President of the United States, 1817-1825. He was a forceful advocate of liberal reform measures and served valiantly in directing the defense of the New York area during the War of 1812.

Tompkins Park was not developed until after 1868, the year it was placed under the jurisdiction of the Brooklyn Park Commission which had been authorized in 1859. In the early 1870s the commissioners secured an appropriation of \$25,000 to fill in and grade the lots for the park. Between 1868 and 1873 the noted landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux were charged with the responsibility of designing a number of local parks in the Brooklyn park system. Tompkins Park is one of their more formal but tasteful designs, which has retained much of its original character as an urban park. According to Elizabeth Barlow, (Frederick Law Olmsted's New York), the "arrangement satisfies two clienteles of the park: the homeowners who looked out upon it had a cheerful and agreeable gardenlike view, and the general strolling public could be accommodated in its shady interior."

The residential development of Bedford took place mainly from the 1860s through the 1890s when many private residences were constructed. Mr. Moses Albert Scull purchased his property at 677 Lafayette Avenue on March 27, 1890, and commissioned the New York architect L.C. Holden to design his new townhouse. Plans for this residence were filed on June 12, 1890, and by May 1, 1892, M. Albert Scull was listed in the Brooklyn directory. According to the directories, Mr. Scull was in the cement business. The Scull family retained the residence until 1916.

Three stories in height, above a high basement, this handsome brick and brownstone townhouse is a fine example of the late Romanesque Revival; this is a style which perpetuated the rock-faced stonework and some of the bold character of the earlier Romanesque Revival, but it also introduced certain minor variations, new materials and a general sense of refinement. These materials included brick and terra-cotta for trim; radial arches of brick, either flat or segmental were introduced, in contrast to the traditional Romanesque Revival half-circle arch.

The basement is faced with regular rock-faced ashlar as opposed to the rock-faced random ashlar of the L-shaped stoop which abuts it. The steps, with straight-faced risers without round-nosed treads, have dressed stone copings on the wing-walls so typical of the Romanesque Revival. In the wing-wall facing the street, beneath the landing at the turn of the "L", there is a small window just above the sidewalk which admits light to the basement

entry beneath the stoop. A handsome curvilinear wrought-iron grille protects this window. A deeply recessed door under the top landing gives access to the basement, and a wide window opening in the front wall of the building provides light for the basement.

At the first floor the square-headed doorway, approached by the stoop at the left-hand side of the house, is complemented on the right by a wide window which is the same width and directly above that at the basement. This window, like the doorway, is square-headed; each has a splayed flat arch of rock-faced stonework which accords with the stonework of the front wall of the first floor. At the sill level of the second floor a thin stone molding, extending the width of the house, serves as a window sill. An attractive feature of this facade is a shallow corbel, placed in the top course of stonework, which supports the projecting sill of the wide second floor window at the right-hand side. It is adorned at each end by handsome bas relief foliate carving. The upper two stories are of brick. At the left side of the second floor a narrow window is centered above the entrance doorway. Both of the second floor windows have splayed arches of terra-cotta which are carried up to a terra-cotta cap molding which extends the width of the house. The narrow square-headed window has a flat arch, while the wide window has a segmental arch. Horizontal band courses of brick intersect the heads of these windows at impost block level, defining the tops of the openings and giving emphasis to the bases of the arches.

The third floor has three windows, one centered above the doorway and two to the right set above the wide second floor window. These three top floor windows have splayed flat arches; the two brick band courses are repeated here at impost block level. The splayed arches are of terra cotta and each of the five stones forming the arch is clearly articulated with panelling. Immediately above the heads of the arches is a terra-cotta fascia surmounted by a projecting molded cornice, topped by a very low brick parapet.

The refined terra-cotta detail in the upper brick portion of the house contrasts well with the rock-faced lower portion and adds considerable interest to the overall appearance of the facade. Further contrast is added by the brilliant orange color of the brick in conjunction with the more subdued color of the brownstone.

A movement begun by Mrs. Hattie Carthan, affectionately known as "the tree lady", in the early 1950s to save the Magnolia Grandiflora resulted in its designation as a landmark and in the construction of a protective wing-wall of masonry to the north. The wall was built as the result of an extensive study conducted by the Commission aided by horticultural experts. This tree belongs to the most beautiful of the North American magnolia species, the Magnolia Grandiflora; it is a "laurel magnolia", an evergreen tree which grows to a height of over seventy feet. It is located directly in front of No. 679, the easternmost of the three houses which have protected the tree for many years. This protection has enabled the tree to grow to its present great size.

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 677 Lafayette Avenue House (Magnolia Grandiflora) 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 677 Lafayette Avenue House is a fine example of the late Romanesque Revival style, that it combines rock-faced brownstone at the lower stories with brick and terra-cotta trim at the upper stories, that it faces Tompkins Park which was planned by Olmsted and Vaux, and that this house has helped to protect the Magnolia Grandiflora tree, a designated New York City Landmark -- a unique example of the relationship between the built and the natural environments.

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 677 Lafayette Avenue House (Magnolia Grandiflora), Borough of Brooklyn and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Brooklyn Tax map, Block 1785, Lot 161 on which the described building is situated.