

143 WEST 95th STREET HOUSE (The Charles A. Vissani Residence), 143 West 95th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1889, architect James W. Cole.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1226, Lot 15.

On July 12, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 143 West 95th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 27). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Fourteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The owner spoke in opposition to designation. Three letters in support of designation were received by the Commission.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The 143 West 95th Street House, designed by James W. Cole and constructed in 1889, is a distinguished residence displaying a late Victorian version of the Gothic Revival style, a treatment typically associated with churches and rectories and seldom used for rowhouses in Manhattan. This residence, however, commissioned by the Very Reverend Charles A. Vissani, who gained recognition as the first Commissary General of the Holy Land for the United States, was also used as a headquarters for the religious work of the Franciscan priests who lived there. The original use of the building is reflected in the strong ecclesiastical overtones of the design whose fine detailing includes pointed and ogee arches, pinnacles, trefoils, and drip moldings. A gabled parapet and an elaborate stoop contribute to the grand scale and pleasing proportions of the building and add further distinction to the facade, setting it apart from its neighbors and distinguishing it from the more typical Upper West Side rowhouse form. All of these elements combine to produce a dignified Gothic-inspired design for a house associated with an important religious endeavor in the United States, that of arousing public interest in the holy places of Jerusalem.

Site History

The block bounded by West 95th and 96th Streets and Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues (Block 1226) originally fell within the Charles W. Apthorp farm. In December of 1888 Jane Ann Brown conveyed what is now lot 15 to Rev. Charles A. Vissani. Vissani's purchase was subject to a covenant which restricted all subsequent owners to erect on the property no building other than a "private dwelling house for the use of one family." In addition, that house was to "be of the same general character of workmanship as the

private dwelling houses already erected upon said street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues."¹ Among the architects whose work was already represented on this block were Charles T. Mott and William J. Merritt, both active in the development of Manhattan's Upper West Side occurring at the time. These houses, constructed of brick, are typically three and four stories in height with high, straight stoops or low stoops associated with the American basement plan. The residence for Vissani is distinguished from these rowhouses by its stone facing, its exuberant Gothic detail, its gabled roofline, and its substantial stoop, all of which give the residence a grand presence on the block.

The Client: Charles A. Vissani

Charles A. Vissani was born in Nazzano, a town near Rome, Italy, on May 13, 1831. He entered the Franciscan order on May 6, 1846, and was ordained a priest on September 23, 1854, having made his novitiate at the friary of Greccio.² Vissani taught philosophy and the classics and was appointed secretary to his Provincial in Rome. Leaving Italy during a period of political and religious turmoil, he first came to the United States in January of 1868 as Commissary for the New York Franciscan Custody of the Immaculate Conception and worked as a missionary with Italian immigrants.³ On July 13th of 1868 he was appointed Custos Provincial of the Province of the Immaculate Conception. He served in that position until 1871, and again from 1874 to 1877. During the latter term he also served as the fifth president of St. Bonaventure University making "notable and noteworthy advances" in the expansion and organization of the school and its student societies.⁴ Between terms as Custos, Vissani lived in New York City to which he returned in 1877 to the Roman Catholic parish of St. Francis of Assisi at 135 West 31st Street.⁵ From 1880 to 1883 Vissani was again appointed Custos Provincial, making his headquarters at St. Francis.

In December of 1880, the position of Commissary General of the Holy Land for the United States was canonically established and assigned to Vissani. The first headquarters of the Commissariat was founded in 1881 at the parish of St. Francis of Assisi. The main function of the Commissariat, which carries out its mission to this day, is to arouse the interest of the general public in the holy places of Jerusalem and to preserve "the sanctuaries of Palestine and [to recover] those which [have] fallen into infidel hands."⁶ Accordingly, Vissani's main task was the promotion and organization of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and he gained recognition as the first person to organize such a pilgrimage from the United States. Other functions of the Commissariat are the collection of funds (including the Good Friday collections, instituted by Vissani) and the training of missionaries, both for the maintenance of the holy places of Jerusalem.⁷ Vissani also issued the Pilgrim of Palestine, a weekly newspaper which assisted in the propagation of the association.⁸

In December of 1887 the headquarters of the Commissariat was transferred to 309 West 52nd Street. New York City directories list Vissani at this address beginning in 1888. Here, Vissani resided in the vicinity of the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart located at 453 West 51st

Street. Vissani may have been associated with the Sacred Heart parish while he resided in the neighborhood. This parish has a school, at 452 West 52nd Street, which was constructed in 1895 according to the designs of James W. Cole, the architect who by that time had designed Vissani's residence on 95th Street.⁹

Vissani's first pilgrimage was completed in 1889,¹⁰ the same year as the construction of the residence on 95th Street. Vissani is first listed as residing at 143 West 95th Street in 1890, although he may have moved into the building upon its completion in the previous July. The residence became the new headquarters for the Commissariat. It is somewhat unusual that a Franciscan who took a vow of poverty (rendering him unable to own property) was recorded as the owner of the residence in both conveyance and Department of Buildings records. However, because the residence was instrumental in Vissani's work as Commissary, it seems that an exception was made and Vissani was authorized to purchase the property on behalf of the organization.¹¹

Vissani's health began to deteriorate after his second trip to the Holy Land which was undertaken in the early 1890s. He traveled to Rome to visit his relatives in hopes of recovery, but died there on September 27, 1896. Vissani was succeeded in his position as Commissary General by Rev. Godfrey Schilling who had been previously associated with the Province of St. John the Baptist in Cincinnati and had been appointed the Vice Commissary General in 1891. The residence at 143 West 95th Street was conveyed to Schilling in August of 1896 shortly before Vissani's death. Schilling gained a reputation as the founder of the Commissariat's new home in Washington, D.C., the transfer of which was approved in 1897. The cornerstone of the new building was laid on March 19, 1898, and Schilling moved to his new home and headquarters in 1899, leaving Brother Placidus Lenne, O.F.M. to conclude affairs at 95th Street. The Commissariat is still located in Washington, D.C. today at the Franciscan Monastery of Mount Saint Sepulchre and has gained the reputation as the principal of three Commissariats in the country.¹² A statue of Schilling decorates the lawn of the monastery.

Design

In 1896 the New York Times reported that the proceeds of Vissani's first pilgrimage were used to build the structure at 143 West 95th Street. However, the article refers to the building as a "church."¹³ While original plans of the building cannot be located, other sources confirm that the structure accommodated more than residential space for the Commissary General. Interior space was designated for office use so that the business of the Commissariat could be conducted there. Other Franciscan priests involved in the work of the Commissariat lived there as well, including Rev. Godfrey Schilling, who subsequently owned the building. In addition, space was allocated for a chapel to accommodate the daily worship needs of the priests. The chapel was dedicated to St. Charles of Setia, Vissani's patron saint. Thus, the building was used as a residence -- or friary, as the headquarters for the Commissariat, and as a place of worship.¹⁴

Style

In mid- to late-nineteenth century American architecture, the Gothic Revival had long been accepted as an appropriate style for places of worship, exemplified in New York City by Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church (1839-46), and James Renwick, Jr.'s Grace Church (1843-46) and St. Patrick's Cathedral (1853-89).¹⁵ However, Gothic-inspired forms had only a limited application in urban residential architecture. Earlier in the century, writers and painters helped to create an aesthetic of romanticism which emphasized picturesque structures in rural settings. Particularly influenced by English architecture and landscape, American architects began to produce designs for residential architecture which paralleled this image, such as Gothic Revival style country villas. Alexander Jackson Davis's Lyndhurst (first called Knoll, 1838) in Tarrytown, New York, is a prime example. Davis translated his ideas for Gothic-inspired residences into published form with Rural Residences (1837), a book followed by A.J. Downing's Cottage Residences (1842) and The Architecture of Country Houses (1850), which further popularized the picturesque aesthetic. Like that of Lyndhurst, the designs found in these publications were for country houses placed in expansive settings, with picturesque features such as porches, gables, elaborate rooflines, and asymmetrical massing that extended the building into the landscape.

Because of its emphasis on space-consuming features, the Gothic Revival style promoted by Davis and Downing was not easily adapted to the constraints of a residence on a small city lot. In New York City, adaptations of Gothic architecture were employed much less often than classically-derived styles for rowhouse and town house design and achieved only minor popularity for residential architecture during the mid-nineteenth century. When the style was used for city rowhouses, it was typically identified by applied ornamental details, including hood moldings, drip moldings, pointed or Tudor arches, pointed gables, carved trefoils, pinnacles, and finials. Few Gothic Revival style residential buildings survive in Manhattan, and most of those which do are buildings associated with churches, such as rectories.

By the 1870s the Gothic Revival style had developed into High Victorian Gothic. This later trend maintained traditional features of Gothic architecture, such as pointed arches, but achieved a bolder overall appearance with the use of elaborate, abundant detailing and the incorporation of materials of various types, textures, and colors to achieve dramatic polychromatic effects. These features created more complex designs much heavier in appearance than those of the earlier, more academic Gothic Revival.

Vissani's residence, constructed in the late-nineteenth century, displays the use of applied ornamental details which identify its style as medieval-based, as in the early Gothic Revival period. The details themselves, however, are numerous and often more complex than is typically found in the early revival. The bold forms of the various window and door surrounds, sill lines, and parapet detailing follow the later Victorian trends in the handling of ornament. The treatment of the stoop, with its

grand scale and weightiness, likewise corresponds to the later trend. The design can be seen, thus, as a late Victorian version of the Gothic Revival style. Nevertheless, the use of the Gothic Revival for this residence continues the tradition of employing the style for buildings associated with religious purposes.

The Architect: James W. Cole

James W. Cole, the architect of the 143 West 95th Street House, practiced as an architect in New York as early as 1886, although in 1883-84 he was listed in New York City directories as a designer. His office was first established at 401 West 46th Street and in 1888-89 moved to 403 West 51st Street where it remained through 1916. Subsequently, he was not listed in the city directory. The majority of Cole's work was completed in the early-to mid-1890s and consisted mainly of apartment buildings. Examples of his work can be found in what are now the Greenwich Village, Mt. Morris Park, and Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic Districts, as well as on Lenox Avenue and elsewhere in Harlem. At the turn of the century Cole's representative work was listed in Forbes's Keys to the Architects of Greater New York as the Lion Palace Music Hall at Broadway and 110th Street (demolished) and the Sacred Heart School on West 52nd Street. Cole also designed the Reformed Presbyterian Church at 306 West 122nd Street (now the Mt. Olive Church of God) in 1897, which displays such Gothic-inspired detailing as pointed arches, buttresses, and corbel friezes.¹⁶

Description

Construction of the residence at 143 West 95th Street began on February 12, 1889, and was completed on July 15th of the same year. Twenty-seven feet wide, it consists of three stories above a basement. The limestone facade of the residence is remarkably intact and retains a wealth of Gothic-inspired detailing which recalls the ecclesiastical associations of the building's original owner. A high, L-shaped stoop leads to the main entrance at the first story. The elaborate stoop is faced in rough-cut stone and contains an arched basement window opening with an iron grille facing the street. The stoop's balustrade walls and the areaway wall are smooth faced and are punctuated by oculi. A metal grille door under the stoop leads to the basement. A metal gate provides access to the areaway from the sidewalk. A concrete planter/trash can stand has been added in the repaved areaway.

The raised basement of the residence is faced with rough-cut stone; the smooth stone facing of the upper stories begins just above the basement windows which have sharply cut rectangular openings, grilles, and simply detailed heads. Sash, here and above, are one-over-one double-hung wood, with translucent glass at the basement.

Above the basement, the facade of the residence has three window bays at each story, with each level differentiated by varying window surrounds and ornament. The first story contains large round-arched openings, each flanked by pilasters and topped by pointed arches. The tympanums are filled with profuse foliate detail surrounding central shields. From west to east are depicted laurel, symbolizing honor and victory; palm, symbolizing the pilgrimage; and oak, symbolizing strength. The westernmost opening accommodates the entry which originally consisted of a pair of wood doors and a rounded glazed transom and now has a wood and glass replacement door. Windows at the first story are fronted by grilles and have projecting sills supported by brackets. Blind oculi are found between the brackets.

The points of the first-story arches intersect the second-story sill course. Window openings there are square-headed and are emphasized by pointed arches and elongated drip moldings. A carved trefoil is found below the point of each arch. A cross originally surmounted the center window. Third-story window openings are rounded and have carved ogee-arch moldings with bosses. Protruding sills are supported by brackets with foliate carving.

The 143 West 95th Street House is taller than most other rowhouses on the street. Its parapet has a tripartite design emphasized by pinnacles with trefoil motifs extending above the roofline. The lower edges of the pinnacles are carved and have scrolls. The raised central section of the parapet forms a pointed gable and accommodates an arched niche whose pointed molding was originally surmounted by a cross. The rounded protruding base of the niche is filled with foliate carving and intersects the ogee molding of the central third-story window. A band of stylized trefoils borders the parapet.

While the building was used as the Commissariat, an emblem of the Holy Land and the Franciscan coat of arms was placed on the facade. The emblem, originally located in the shield above the main entrance, consisted of the words "Commissariat of the Holy Land," a crown, a dove, and the Franciscan arms. One arm was depicted with a sleeve and represented St. Francis; the other arm represented Christ. Both hands were shown with the stigmata. The shields centered in tympanums of the first-story windows originally displayed the Crusader cross (see photographs). These embellishments were removed around 1905 when the building ceased to function as the Commissariat.¹⁷

The eastern elevation of the building is partially visible from the street. It faces onto a three-foot wide alley closed from the street by a metal gate. The brick wall is punctuated by through-wall air conditioners at each story.

Subsequent History

Rev. Godfrey Schilling moved to Washington, D.C. by 1899 to attend to the business of the Commissariat in its new home. He transferred the property at 143 West 95th Street to Peter B. Englebert in 1905. The property was subsequently conveyed and in 1946 was converted to a multiple dwelling consisting of apartments and furnished rooms. In 1966 plans were filed to convert the whole interior to apartments. This work was completed in 1969 and the building remains a multiple dwelling.

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NOTES

1. New York County, Office of the Register. Liber Deeds and Conveyances, (May 4, 1888), Liber 2128, p. 318; and (Dec. 4, 1888), Liber 2169 p. 389-390.
2. Greccio is known as the place where the Christmas crib was first reproduced.
3. Excerpt from Jubilee Book provided by Brother Joseph, O.F.M.
4. St. Bonaventure University is located near Olean, in western New York, close to the Pennsylvania border. When the first group of Franciscans came to the United States from Italy in the 1850s, they arrived with the purpose of establishing the University. Adalbert Callahan, Medieval Francis in Modern America (New York, 1936), 123 and James Villa, O.F.M., Telephone Conversation.
5. This church was organized by the Franciscan Fathers in 1844 as the first Franciscan parish in New York City and retains a church-monastery status. The present church was begun in 1891. At some point Vissani acted as "guardian" of the parish of St. Francis of Assisi and, later, of the parish of St. Anthony, located on Sullivan Street. Historical Records Survey, Inventory of Church Archives in New York City, The Roman Catholic Church, (1939-40). "Jubilee Book." "Death of Father Vissani," New York Catholic News, Oct. 4, 1896, p. 1.
6. Callahan, 126.
7. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 4 (New York, 1962), 11.
8. Other publications begun by Vissani were the Advocate and the Crusader Almanac.
9. If Vissani was associated with the parish, he may have had some influence in the choice of Cole as architect for its school building.
10. The pilgrims celebrated mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral before sailing.
11. Statutes have been written into the Franciscan law which enable the members to corporately own property that is required for the function of their mission. (Brother Anthony Sejda, telephone conversation, Nov. 15, 1990.) It is unclear whether or not Vissani was associated with a parish while he worked and lived at 95th Street, but it is possible that he was in some way associated with the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Name of Jesus at 96th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. The site of his headquarters/residence may have been chosen for its proximity to this parish.
12. The other commissariats are located in St. Louis, Missouri and Oakland, California.

13. "To Father Vissani's Memory," New York Times, Oct. 2, 1896, p.10.
14. Information in this section is based on a conversation with Brother Anthony Sejda, and the "Fact Sheet" and a photograph of the building's interior provided by Brother Joseph, O.F.M. The interior of the residence is not subject to this designation, nor is it being considered for designation.
15. Trinity Church, Grace Church, and St. Patrick's Cathedral are all designated New York City Landmarks.
16. City of New York Death Records indicate that a James W. Cole died on January 17, 1919, at sixty-two years of age (indicating a year of birth of 1856 or 1857); this is probably the architect.
17. Brother Anthony Sejda and "Fact Sheet." A shadow of the Crusader cross is now barely visible in the center shield.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 143 West 95th Street House (the Charles A. Vissani Residence) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

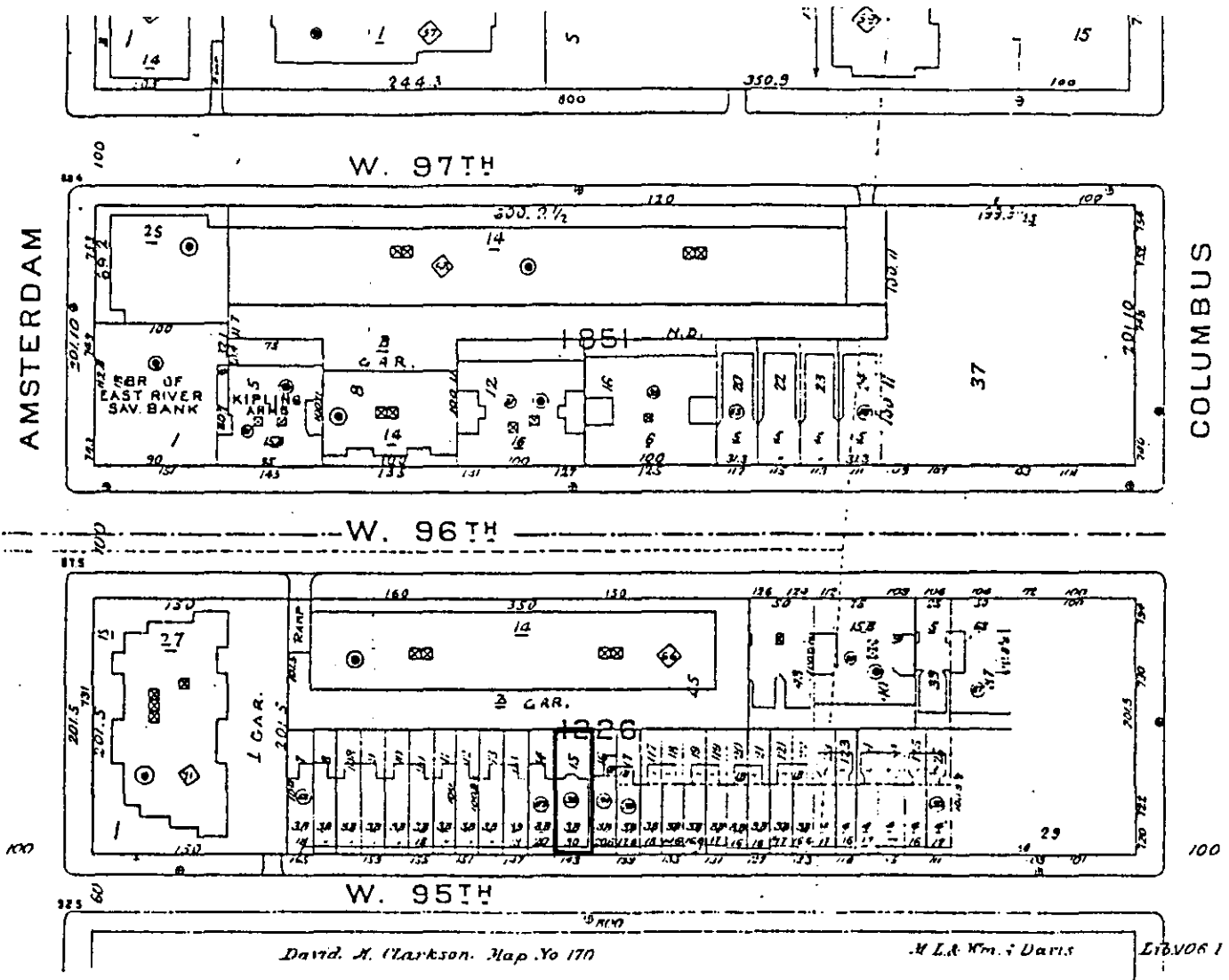
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 143 West 95th Street House, designed by James W. Cole and built in 1889, is a distinguished residence displaying a late Victorian version of the Gothic Revival style; that the style, typically associated with churches and rectories, is uncommon in rowhouse design in Manhattan; that the residence was commissioned by the Very Reverend Charles A. Vissani, who gained recognition as the first Commissary General of the Holy Land for the United States and organized the first pilgrimage from the United States to the Holy Land; that the building, which served as the headquarters for the Commissariat while occupied by Vissani and other Franciscan priests involved in the work of the Commissariat, was associated with an important religious endeavor in the United States, that of arousing public interest in the holy places of Jerusalem; that the original use of the building is reflected in the strong ecclesiastical overtones of the design; that the medieval-based style is articulated on the facade by fine detailing including pointed and ogee arches, carved ornament, pinnacles, trefoils, and drip moldings; that the gabled parapet and the elaborate stoop contribute to the grand scale and pleasing proportions of the building and add further distinction to the facade, setting it apart from its neighbors and distinguishing it from the more typical Upper West Side rowhouse form; and that the building displays a dignified Gothic-inspired design which survives remarkably intact.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534, Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 143 West 95th Street House (the Charles A. Vissani Residence), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1226, Lot 15, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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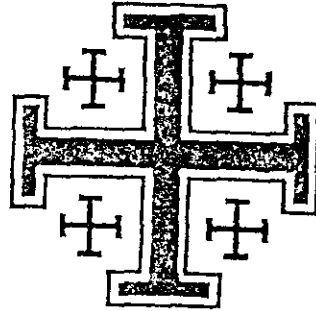


David H. Clarkson. Map No 170

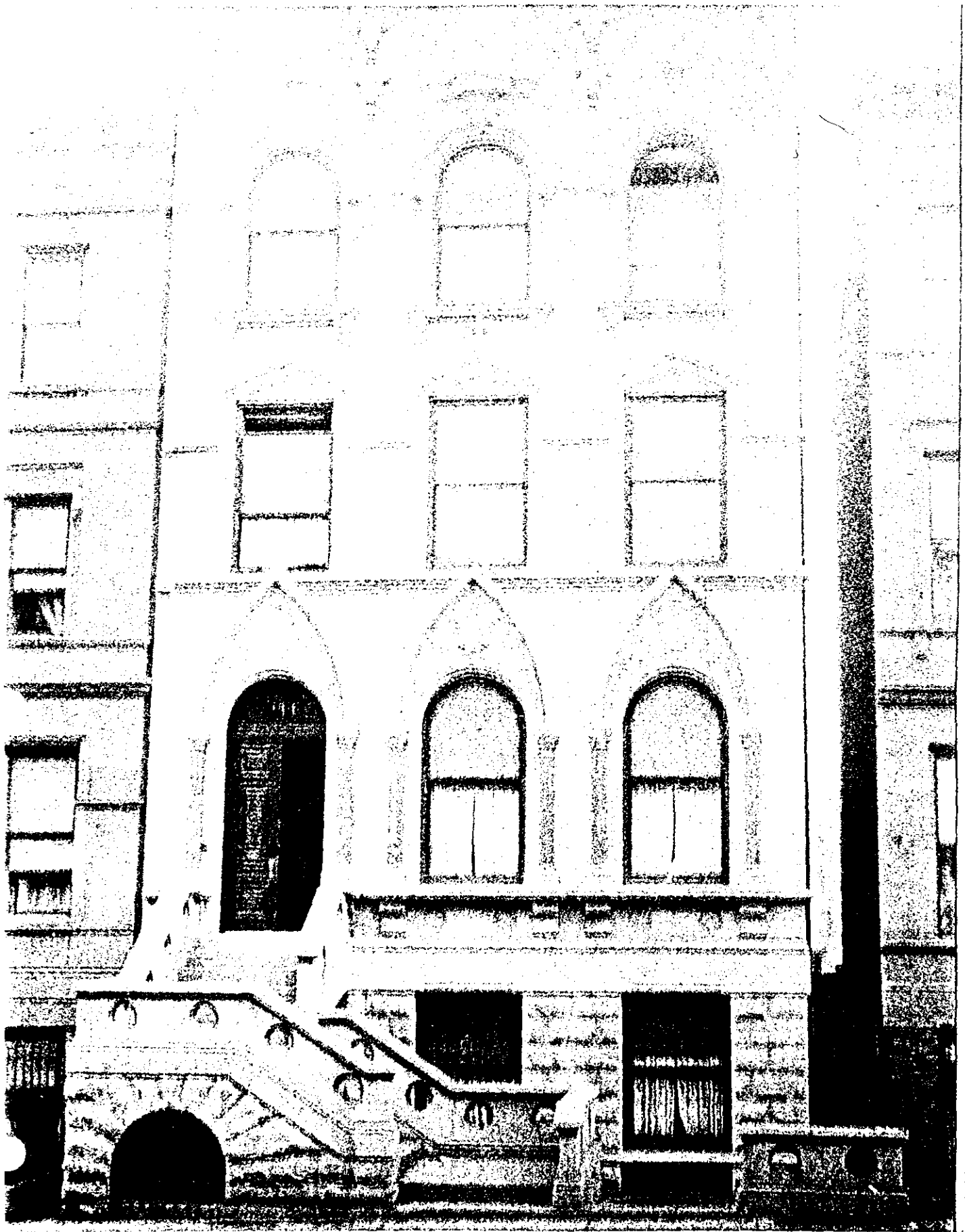
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143 West 95th Street House, Landmark Site.
 Graphic Source: Sanborn, Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.



Top: The Crusader Cross.
Bottom: Fr. Charles A. Vissani c.1889. (Provided by the
Commissariat of the Holy Land Franciscan Monastery, Washington, D.C.)



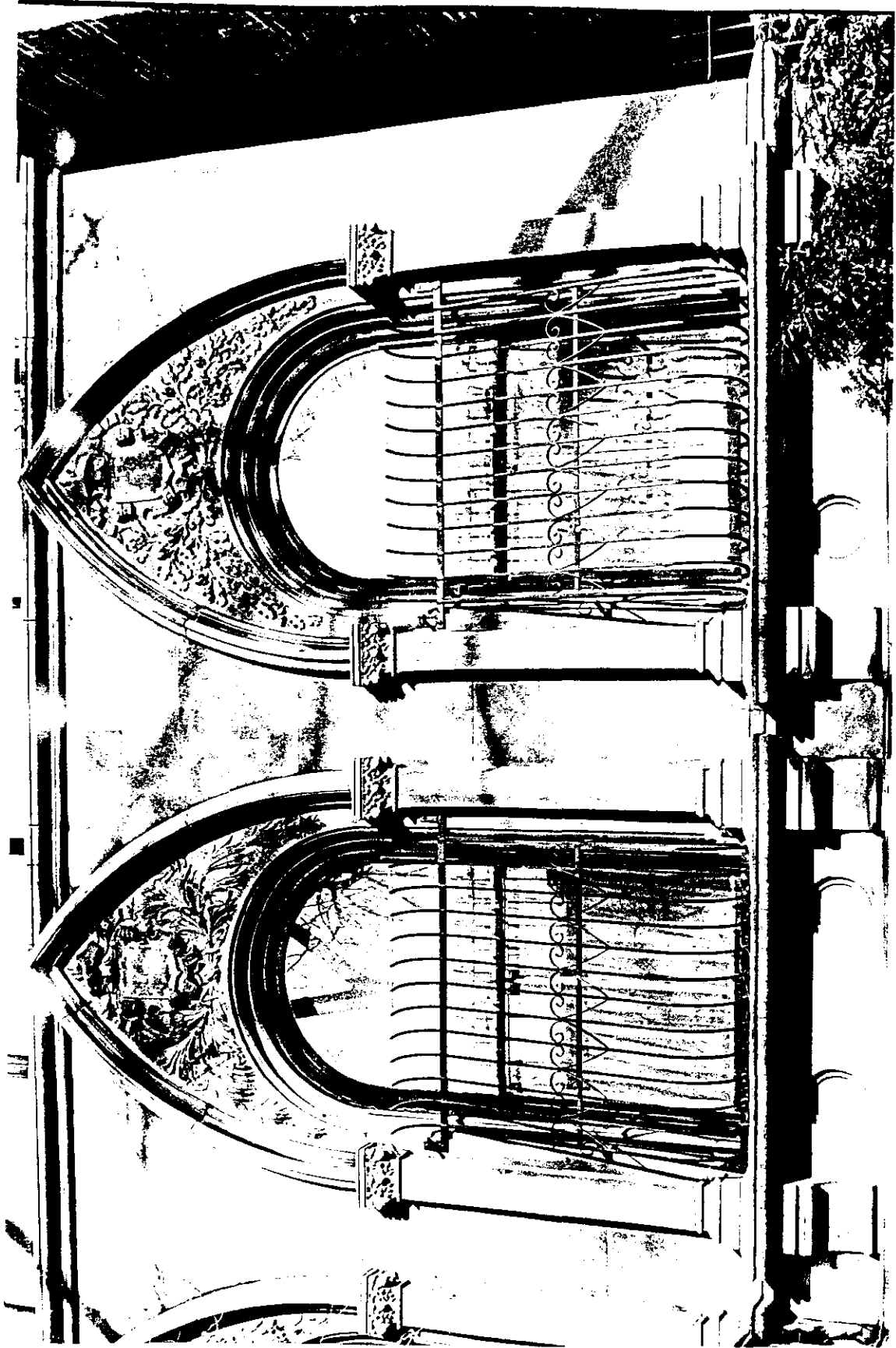
An early photograph of the 143 West 95th Street House.
(Provided by the Commissariat of the Holy Land
Franciscan Monastery, Washington, D.C.)



143 West 95th Street House. James W. Cole, 1889.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



143 West 95th Street House, Detail of Entrance.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



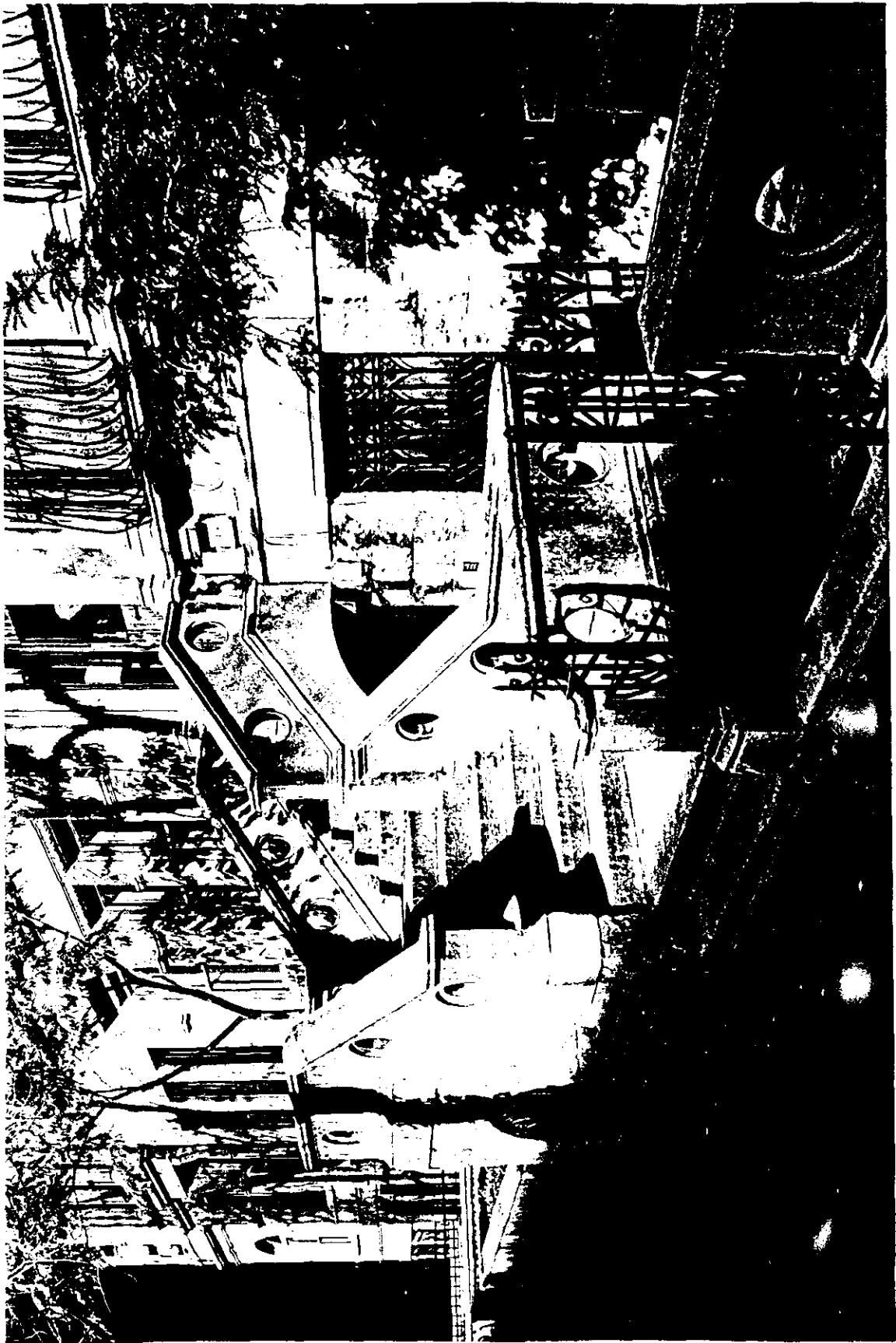
143 West 95th Street House, Detail of First-Story Windows.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



143 West 95th Street House, Detail of Third-Story Windows.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



143 West 95th Street House, Detail at Roof.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



143 West 95th Street House, Detail of Stoop.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.