

Landmarks Preservation Commission
April 16, 1991; Designation List 234
LP-1677

316 WEST 85th STREET HOUSE, 316 West 85th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1892; architect Clarence True.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1246, Lot 40.

On July 12, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 316 West 85th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Ten witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Four letters have been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Situated on the south side of West 85th Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive, the distinctive three-story 316 West 85th Street House -- one house in a row of six houses -- was planned by the noted architect Clarence True and was constructed for speculator-builder Charles G. Judson in 1892, at a time when the blocks in the West Eighties between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive were first developed. The overall design composition of this house is part of the A-B-A-A-B-A facade pattern of the row, and the 316 West 85th Street House represents a refined example of the Italian Renaissance style adapted to the requirements of the American basement plan, popularized on the Upper West Side by its architect Clarence True. This facade is a well-conceived and finely executed design. Its spare and well-cut ornament demonstrate great respect for the inherent quality of its exterior fabric -- Maynard red sandstone, light orange Roman brick, and red pantiles. Indeed, the polychromy of these materials is an essential element of the facade's design. No. 316 West 85th Street has been changed very little since 1892 and retains much of its original ironwork and decorative door hardware.

The Development of the Upper West Side

The evolution of the present appearance of West 85th Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive is a reflection of the Upper West Side's greater development pattern. Largely undeveloped until the 1880s, the area was known as "Bloomingdale" prior to urbanization and was comprised of working farms in the eighteenth century and landed estates in the early nineteenth century. While included in the Commissioner's Map of 1811, which platted a grid of avenues and streets in Manhattan as far north as 155th Street, the area remained essentially rural and most of the streets were not laid out until after the Civil War. The creation of Central Park beginning in 1857 contributed to the growth of the areas around the Park's perimeter, but improved public transportation spurred the area's sustained development

onward. In particular, the Ninth Avenue (Columbus Avenue) Elevated Railroad, completed in 1879 with stations at 72nd, 81st, 93rd, and 104th Streets, encouraged the area's growth. However, the biggest boost to the development of the West End, the area west of Broadway, was the creation, between 1876 and 1900, of Riverside Drive and Park (now a designated New York City Scenic Landmark) north of 72nd Street. Following the Financial Panic of 1873, development proceeded slowly but by 1885 the Upper West Side had become the scene of the city's most intense real estate speculation.

The tract now including the westernmost blocks of West 85th Street, once a portion of the Oliver DeLancey farm which was conveyed to John H. Howland in 1825, was not partitioned into lots until 1850. Subsequently, a parcel of four lots, each 25 by 100 feet, along West 85th Street's south side (comprising lots 40 through 43) was sold twice, in 1872 and in 1887. This parcel corresponds to the row at 316 through 326 West 85th Street. It should be noted that this site is located on a gentle rise from West End Avenue west to Riverside Drive.

The Rowhouse and the Speculative Builder

The earliest Upper West Side rowhouse speculators owned the property on which the houses were constructed; Edward S. Clark, President of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, who commissioned Henry J. Hardenbergh to design the row at 41 to 49 West 73rd Street in 1879-80, has been cited as an example of this trend.¹ The speculative builder followed close behind. Such a builder, often in concert with a property owner, would employ an architect with whom he often worked in partnership. Each received his share of the profit when the improved properties were sold. Charles G. Judson was listed as the owner on the New Building Application at the time it was filed for 316 West 85th Street and the other five houses west of it in this row of six buildings -- April 21, 1892.² Judson's architect for this commission, and for at least seven others,³ was Clarence True with whom he shared a business address at 102 West 82nd Street from 1892 until 1897.⁴

A measure of how concentrated the development climate was throughout the city was the common practice among rowhouse developers of purchasing groups of lots and reconfiguring them, thus maximizing the number of houses within the row by building the houses narrower than the standard twenty-five foot lot. Judson subdivided these four lots on the south side of West 85th Street into six, each measuring sixteen feet, eight inches in width.

The Architect

Born in Massachusetts, Clarence Fagan True (1860-1928) received his earliest professional experience in New York in the office of Richard Michell Upjohn (1828-1903), son of Richard Upjohn (1802-1878), one of this country's leading Gothic Revival architects. True started his architectural training in the Upjohn office in 1881; directories indicate that he was there until 1887.⁵ Although the Upjohn office is known chiefly for its ecclesiastical work, True's reputation as an independent architect rests on the quantity and quality of his domestic commissions, principally on the Upper West Side. True opened his own office in 1889, although it

wasn't until April of the following year that he first filed plans for a group of houses (at 301 to 319 West 89th Street);⁶ he was listed as an architect at 571 The Boulevard (Broadway) in 1891. True worked primarily for speculative builders (Henry Chaffee, Richard G. Platt, Theodore A. Squier, J. Edgar Coar, W. E. Lanchantin, and W. J. Merritt); his office is credited with at least 270 houses on the Upper West Side, including those for Charles G. Judson. In 1894 True entered the speculative housing business as well; he was able to secure a majority of the block-front properties along Riverside Drive, from 72nd to 84th Streets, and through his Riverside Building Company constructed many of the houses now included in the West End-Collegiate and Riverside Drive-West 80th-81st Street Historic Districts. He produced two publications -- Designs of 141 Dwelling Houses (1893) and Riverside Drive (1899) -- in which he promoted his work and advertised the availability of the finished product.

True was a consummate and innovative planner, a talent that was recognized by his contemporaries,⁷ and that is still evident today. He is credited, if not for introducing it, then for popularizing the American basement plan with its low stoop. The quantity and quality of the office's finished work remains impressive, but it is likely that the final design of elevations and exterior (and interior) details was left to True's skillful draftsman, J.A. Johnson, who adapted the blend of academic historicism and up-to-date refinement which characterize True's well-planned houses. Johnson's signatures are integral to the original drawings themselves and are always dated. True's signature and the address of the office always appear in a clearly defined space in the drawing -- a space created by his draftsman. True was careful to note, "Designed & Built under the superintendance" or "under the supervision of the Architect."⁸

Design and Construction

Architects of rowhouses on the Upper West Side designed rows as coherent units, but the individual houses varied in their details and were often arranged in a rhythmic design pattern. True took rowhouse design a few steps beyond this treatment. No. 316 West 85th Street and the other five houses west of it (Plate 1), designed in 1892, are a variation of the Italian Renaissance solution that True and his associates created for an earlier row on West End Avenue. For the builder Richard D. Platt in 1890, True planned a block of three, four-story houses on West End Avenue between 88th and 89th Streets.⁹ An appropriate urban prototype, an Italian Renaissance palazzo facade, was adapted to True's American basement plan. The three facades are arranged in an A-B-A pattern of projecting, three-story bays, with an arcade of windows, two windows in the end houses and three in the center house, spanning the fourth stories. This arcade, the rusticated and diapered brickwork, and the common cornice contribute to the row's unified aspect, yet each house has an individual character.

The facades of the West 85th Street row share the American basement plan and the other unifying design elements with the houses of the earlier Platt row, such as the third-story window arcade and the rusticated brick banding, although the A-B-A rhythm has been extended and the oriels have replaced the projecting bays. The design of the 316 West 85th Street House

front is part of the A-B-A-A-B-A facade pattern of the row. The "A" and "B" components of the row are differentiated by the treatment of the oriels and the third-story arcades. No. 316, like the other houses in the row, is distinguished by a number of Italian Renaissance-inspired features -- the rusticated bands of red sandstone at the basement and first story and light orange brick above, the uninterrupted course of red sandstone foliated ornament, the third story window arcade, and the tiled false roof. The polychromy of the materials is an essential element of the facade's design.

Description

In the A-B-A-A-B-A rhythm of the row, No. 316 is an "A" (Plate 2).¹⁰ The first story of this house, comprising three bays -- the main entrance and two windows to the west -- is faced with bullnose rusticated Maynard red sandstone ashlar, lightly broached. Four steps, between cheeks of smoothly dressed ashlar incorporating a broader, rounded cap terminating in a knob (all in the same red sandstone), lead up to the door sill from the sidewalk (Plate 3).¹¹ Separating the first and second stories is a sandstone course of intricately carved naturalistic foliation spanning the full width of the house (as well as the full width of the row). Rather than being executed spontaneously on the site, this ornamental course (Plate 4) is based upon published prototypes; the combination of classical rinceaux and earlier Gothic forms is a characteristic of the early Italian Renaissance style.¹²

Both the second and third stories are faced with rusticated bands of light orange brick. The division between this rowhouse facade and the one to the west is defined by aligning the reveals of the rusticated brick bands to form a vertical crease. The two second-story windows are contained within a flat-faced oriel of smoothly dressed red sandstone, which is supported on five corbels and carries a broad-eaved roof of red pantiles (Plate 2).¹³ As one of the "A" houses in the row, No. 316 has three third-story windows. The red sandstone voussoirs of this arcade are keyed into the rusticated brick banding. This house is topped with a false roof covered with red pantiles. The galvanized iron cornice has raised rinceaux running the length of its soffit.

On the surface of the reveal of the entrance there is a molding articulated in a low-relief knot-and-spiral motif (Plate 3).¹⁴ There are also a number of original wrought-iron elements. It is likely that the areaway railing, the basement window grille, the Art Nouveau style door hardware (hinges and knob plate), and the grille of the door transom (now missing) were all designed by J. A. Johnson. The first-story window grilles on this house are reproductions, copies of the basement grille.¹⁵

Subsequent History

Charles Judson did not sell the 316 West 85th Street House until the end of May, 1893, and then to a speculator who bought Nos. 322 and 326 as well. This house was sold a year later and did not come back onto the market until 1929. It had changed hands three times when in 1941 it was converted into a multiple dwelling -- apartments and furnished rooms.¹⁶ The subsequent owners wishing to convert all of the units into apartments,

applied for an alteration permit in October, 1972, but sold No. 316 in December of the same year to another owner who carried out the alterations.

A non-historic light fixture has been placed in the lintel stone over the main entrance (Plate 3). Aluminum storm sash have been placed in front of the original one-over-one wood sash.

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NOTES

1. Sarah Bradford Landau, "Row Houses of New York's West Side," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 34, no. 1 (Mar. 1975), 20.
2. In the Office of the Register, New York County, Judson's deed to the property is not recorded until January 10, 1893, nine months later. The first house in the row to be sold (No. 320) was sold fourteen days after the deed was recorded. It is possible that Judson had an agreement -- a "paper transaction" -- with the property's previous owner, John F. Comey, to improve the property and share the gain.
3. These were houses at: 159 West End Avenue; on West 75th Street; on 94th Street and West End Avenue; at 296 West 92nd Street; on West 102nd Street; and on West 88th Street.
4. What connection Judson bore to the Charles G. Judson listed in Trow's New York City Directory (1878-83) as a purveyor of rubber goods, first at Mercer Street and then at 73 Leonard Street, is not known. Judson is listed as a builder first in 1893. In 1905-06 he is listed as Manager at 2528 Broadway, a large residential hotel.
5. It is likely that True was the son of Charles K. True (d.1880), a Protestant cleric in Flushing. True was residing in Flushing and College Point during the time he was employed with the Upjohn firm on lower Broadway. Boyd's Directories for Flushing list Elizabeth, the widow of Charles K. True, and a Miss Mary S., both residing at 198 Barclay, Flushing. Edward H. True, Clarence True's uncle, was an assistant rector at Saint George's Protestant Episcopal Church, Flushing, from 1879 until 1889. (Saint Paul's, College Point, was under the care of Saint George's assistant rector.) An ecclesiastical background would explain the choice of the Upjohn office as an appropriate place for Clarence True to begin his architectural career.

6. Landmarks Preservation Commission, 520 West End Avenue House Designation Report (LP-1693), report prepared by Jay Shockley, 1988. New York Illustrated, (New York, 1895), 90.
7. "Some Recently Built West Side Houses," Record & Guide (Supplement), Jan. 28, 1893.
8. This collaborative pattern can be documented with a slightly later example involving another designer -- the rowhouse project on West End Avenue between 84th and 85th Streets commissioned by Richard G. Platt and illustrated in Designs of 141 Dwelling Houses (1893). A signature, a caption, and the accompanying text indicate that the elevations were designed by the Philadelphia architect Frank Miles Day; Clarence True was responsible for the plans and interiors.
9. Illustrated by Johnson, this block can be seen in 141 Dwelling Houses. These houses, 584 to 588 West End Avenue, are now demolished.
10. The New Building Application was filed on April 21, 1892; building commenced on May 19th and was completed the following October 4th. These first-class, single-family houses were estimated to cost \$18,000 each. Each house is sixteen feet, eight inches wide, fifty-three feet, five inches deep, and thirty-seven feet high. Each lot is the same width, but 102 feet deep.
11. As a consequence of West 85th Street's slight rise toward Riverside Drive, there is a slight disparity between the stoop heights of these row houses: Nos. 316 has four steps to the door sill.
12. This course carries a rinceau motif between oriels; where the course incorporates the five oriel corbel capitals its ornament changes mode. Emanating from and flanking a central foliate form are paired mouchettes containing beasts -- dragons and rodent-like creatures.
13. The wall above the oriels is carried on two six-inch, fifty-pound rolled iron beams and each corbel below the oriel is anchored by one eight-inch, sixty-five pound rolled iron beam.
14. This knot-and-spiral motif is only repeated at the entrance of No. 322.
15. This information was provided by Mr. Clifford Johnson, owner and resident of 322 West 85th Street. The reproduced first-story window grilles at No. 322 predate those at No. 316.
16. NYC, Dept. of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1246, Lot 40. ALT. 2295-1941, completed in 1942.

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 316 West 85th 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 316 West 85th Street House is a distinctive house in a row of six houses, designed by the noted architect Clarence F. True and constructed in 1892 for speculator-builder Charles G. Judson at the time when the blocks in the West Eighties between Riverside Drive and West End Avenue were first developed; that stylistically the 316 West 85th Street House represents a refined example of the Italian Renaissance style adapted to the requirements of the American basement house plan; that the design of this house front is part of the A-B-A-A-B-A facade pattern of the row; that this well-conceived and finely executed facade is remarkably intact; that the spare and well-cut ornament of this facade demonstrates great respect for the inherent quality of its exterior fabric -- Maynard red sandstone, light orange Roman brick, and red pantiles; that the polychromy of these materials is an essential element in the design of the facade; and that this house retains a large amount of its original ironwork and door hardware.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of 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 316 West 85th Street House, 316 West 85th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1246, Lot 40, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Plate 1. 316 - 326 West 85th Street. Real Estate Record & Guide (Supplement), Jan. 28, 1893.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 2. 316 West 85th Street.



Plate 3. 316 West 85th Street. Detail, entrance.

(Carl Forster)



Plate 4. 316 West 85th Street. Detail, foliated course.

(Carl Forster)