

Landmarks Preservation Commission
April 16, 1991; Designation List 234
LP-1672

103 RIVERSIDE DRIVE HOUSE, 103 Riverside Drive, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1898-99, architect Clarence F. True. Altered 1910-11 by Clinton & Russell.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1245, Lot 1.

On July 12, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 103 Riverside Drive House, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven speakers testified in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received several written submissions supporting this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The 103 Riverside Drive House, originally designed by well-known architect and developer Clarence F. True, was built on speculation in 1898-99 as one house of a picturesque group of six houses on the southeast corner of Riverside Drive and West 83rd Street. Today the 103 Riverside Drive House is architecturally significant and as one of the five extant houses in this group represents the first period of development on Riverside Drive. True designed several hundred houses, primarily in groups, on the Upper West Side in the years between 1890 and 1901, and was largely responsible for promoting the development and establishing the character of lower Riverside Drive. The houses in the group at Riverside and West 83rd Street were designed in True's signature "Elizabethan Revival" style based on French and English Renaissance prototypes and built by True's development firm, the Riverside Building Company; they are the northernmost of True's designs built along the Drive. The design of the L-shaped 103 Riverside Drive House is characterized by such picturesque elements as contrasting tan Roman ironspot brick and limestone facing, round-arched and rectangular windows, keyed surrounds, side courtyard facades, decorative ironwork, dormers, and a tile roof. This house was originally designed with a projecting bowfront and a low stoop, but these features (along with those of the adjacent houses) became the focus of an interesting legal controversy several years after construction. As the result of a lawsuit brought by an adjacent property owner, the court ruled in 1903 that no one had the authority to place permanent encroachments onto public thoroughfares, and the owners of the houses in the True group facing onto Riverside Drive were thus ordered to remove the projections. In 1911 the main facades were removed and rebuilt to follow the diagonal of the Riverside Drive property lines. No. 103 (owned by Amelia Bingham, an immensely popular actress) was rebuilt with the original materials by the firm of Clinton & Russell so that today, although it reflects the work of two architectural firms, it basically remains a modified version of the original picturesque Elizabethan Revival design.

The Development of Riverside Drive¹

The Upper West Side, known as Bloomingdale prior to its urbanization, remained largely undeveloped until the 1880s. In the early eighteenth century, Bloomingdale Road (later renamed the Boulevard and finally Broadway in 1898) was opened through rural Bloomingdale and provided the northern route out of the city which was then concentrated at the southern tip of Manhattan. The Upper West Side was included in the Randel Survey of 1811 (known as the Commissioners' Map) which established a uniform grid of avenues and cross streets in Manhattan as far north as 155th Street, although years elapsed before streets on the Upper West Side were actually laid out, some as late as the 1870s and 1880s, and the land was subdivided into building lots. Improved public transportation to the area contributed to the growth and sustained development of the Upper West Side, particularly the completion in 1879 of the Elevated Railway on Ninth Avenue (renamed Columbus Avenue in 1890).

The biggest boost to the development of the West End (the area west of Broadway), however, was the creation of Riverside Drive and Park (a designated New York City Scenic Landmark). The presence of the Park and Drive was an important factor in making this area desirable for high-quality residential development. In 1865 the first proposal for converting the land on the Upper West Side along the eastern shore of the Hudson River into an ornamental park had been presented by Park Commissioner William R. Martin. The purchase of the park site and initial plans were approved in 1866. The drive, as proposed at this time, was to be a straight 100-foot wide road; however, this plan was impractical due to the existing topography. Hired by the Commissioners in 1873, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), already distinguished by his collaboration with Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) in the successful design for Central Park, proposed an alternate scheme. Olmsted's design for Riverside Park and Drive took into consideration the pre-existing topography, landscape possibilities, and views, resulting in a park and drive that would be amenable for horses and pleasure driving, would provide shaded walks for pedestrians, and would also allow easy access to and scenic vistas from the real estate bordering it on the east. Olmsted's plan was adopted by the Commissioners but the park was not executed under his supervision, due to his departure from New York City; it was actually developed between 1875 and 1900 by other designers including Vaux, Samuel Parsons, and Julius Munckwitz, who did not adhere to Olmsted's original scheme in its entirety.² By the fall of 1879, work was completed between 72nd and 85th Streets, and Riverside Avenue (as it was called until 1908) was opened to the public in 1880.³

The Drive, from West 72nd Street to approximately 129th Street, where it is effectively terminated by the viaduct and the Manhattanville fault,⁴ has a particularly strong character derived from its curves that break with the regular street grid and its location overlooking the park and the Hudson River. Riverside Park and Drive fulfilled the Park Commissioners' plans for promoting the development of the area west of Broadway. The numerous and exceptional advantages of the location, namely, its situation on a plateau, its "advantages of pure air and beautiful surroundings, glimpses of New

Jersey hills . . . [and] the nearness of parks,"⁵ assisted in making the area along Riverside Drive prime real estate, deserving of the highest character of residential development.

Development of the West End began slowly due to speculation, the hesitation of developers, and to the relative inconvenience of transportation compared to the area east of Broadway. By 1885, however, the whole Upper West Side had emerged as the area in the city experiencing the most intense real estate speculation. The expectation that the blocks along Riverside Drive and West End Avenue would be lined with mansions kept the value of these lots, as well as adjacent land, consistently higher and developers were willing to wait to realize profits from the potentially valuable sites.

The initial development along Riverside Drive mostly took the form of single-family town houses and rowhouses, although some freestanding mansions were built there. Luxury apartment buildings, as they gained in popularity toward the turn of the century, also appeared. Most of the single-family residences on the Upper West Side were speculatively-built rowhouses; along West End Avenue and Riverside Drive the houses tended to be larger and more elegant than those on the side streets. Architect-developer Clarence True, who characterized the Drive and its vicinity as "the most ideal home-site in the western hemisphere -- the Acropolis of the world's second city,"⁶ was largely responsible for the promotion of lower Riverside Drive as an attractive residential thoroughfare and his work there, like the group at 83rd Street, did much to establish the character of the area in the 1890s.

Clarence F. True and the Elizabethan Revival Style⁷

Clarence Fagan True (1860-1928) was a prolific and well-known architect (and later architect-developer) who designed, almost solely, rowhouses and town houses and practiced mainly on the Upper West Side of Manhattan during the years from 1890 to 1901. Born in Massachusetts, he came to New York City in 1880 and was trained in the office of Richard M. Upjohn beginning around 1881; he was listed in directories in 1884 and established his own firm in 1889.⁸ True received his commissions primarily from speculative builders and developers who were rapidly constructing houses throughout the Upper West Side. True is documented as having designed at least 270 houses on the Upper West Side, the majority located west of Broadway between 71st and 107th Streets. Diverse and eclectic in architectural style and massing, these houses contribute greatly to the architectural character of the Upper West Side. He also designed some twenty houses in Harlem, including several now located in the Hamilton Heights and Mount Morris Park Historic Districts. In 1893 he published a prospectus of his work, Designs of 141 Dwelling Houses, in which he stated his aim of creating distinctive well-designed houses, both in interior plan and exterior appearance, that would mark a shift away from the homogeneity of the standard New York City brownstone rowhouse. True's executed work demonstrated that he succeeded in his ambitions.

True was primarily an architect of rowhouse groups. In his houses of the early 1890s, True employed a variety of contemporary architectural

styles, frequently mingling them in an eclectic fashion; these included the popular Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, as well as the Francois I and a style he called "Elizabethan Revival" which was based on French and English Renaissance prototypes. In 1894 True began to work in part as his own developer and later formed the Riverside Building Company. A second prospectus, [A True History of] Riverside Drive (1899), pictured many of the houses for the Riverside Building Company, including the group of six houses at 102 to 107-109 Riverside Drive and 332 West 83rd Street which were then under construction and completed later that same year. In this prospectus True promoted the development of lower Riverside Drive:

Mr. Clarence True, who had erected houses upon some of the lower lots, became so thoroughly impressed with the possibilities of the river front as a residence district that he secured all the available property south of 84th street, and by covering it with beautiful dwellings, insured a most promising future for the Drive.⁹

The area along and adjacent to Riverside Drive, from 75th to 85th Streets, includes the densest concentration of extant houses designed by True; many of these are now included in the West End-Collegiate and Riverside Drive-West 80th-81st Streets Historic Districts. These houses along the Drive -- including No. 103 and the other houses in the corner group at 83rd Street -- are characteristic of most of True's mature work; all were designed in the architect's highly idiosyncratic and readily identifiable "Elizabethan Revival" style. True's rowhouses in this vein are typified by lively silhouettes, composed of such elements as steeply-pitched roofs that often have curved or stepped gables, chimneys, stepped end-walls, turrets, bowed fronts, projecting three-sided and square bays, and dormers. The facades, varied within the group, also display a variety of contrasting materials, including fine brick and stone, and such features as quoins, keyed surrounds, stylized cornices, crenellation, parapets, and decorative ironwork. True's interest in the use of varied colors of building materials is also evident in the group at Riverside and 83rd -- the brick colors graduate in hue from house to house, from tan to light orange to orange to red.

True was one of the architects who greatly popularized the American basement plan for rowhouse design in New York City during these years. He received much favorable notice in the architectural press of the 1890s, which published a number of his designs. Real Estate Record & Guide (1893) stated that True "has earned quite a reputation for the novelty of the ideas he has carried out in a large number of houses built from his designs on the West Side in the last few years. The old method of high stoop construction has been abandoned ... the houses are entered almost on a level with the street."¹⁰ Architecture and Building (1893) noted: "The facades show great variety and taste, and the plans, many of them upon narrow lots, ingenuity and skill in arrangement."¹¹ A History of Real Estate, Building, and Architecture in New York (1899) considered True "probably the best known New York architect designing almost entirely residential structures His work as exemplified by his houses is a credit both to himself and the city."¹²

True also designed several apartment houses, hotels, and small commercial structures, as well as a church building in Harlem. Little is known about the end of his career, but it appears to coincide with the demise of rowhouse construction in New York City after the turn of the century. His last directory listing was in 1910, although Clarence True & Son received a listing in 1916-17.¹³ True died in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1928, and was buried in Middletown, Connecticut.

Ackerman vs. True¹⁴

An interesting controversy developed around the construction of the houses at 102 to 107-109 Riverside Drive which affected the design of their facades eleven years after completion. On July 28, 1898, Clarence True applied, by letter, to the Commissioner of Buildings, Thomas J. Brady, for a foundation permit for six, five-story houses. According to his accompanying plans, each of the six structures partly extended beyond the property line, due to the oblique angle of the Drive, by incorporating stoops, areaway walls, and projecting bays and bowfronts. On August 8, Brady returned a permit to True granting him permission "to construct the foundation work provided for new buildings on E. S. Riverside Drive bet. 82 & 83 St. as per plans...." On August 16, True filed an application for the erection of these six new buildings (NB 730-1898), five fronting Riverside Drive and one fronting West 83rd Street. The Department of Buildings issued an objection to the application on September 15, stating that "projections beyond building lines are unlawful." True then obtained a letter from George C. Clauson, Commissioner of Parks, dated November 21, which granted consent "to the erection of projections on six proposed buildings" and exacted a fee based on the square footage of each projection. On November 28, True filed an amendment to the application which mentioned "consent from Park [sic] Department for projection beyond building lines is filed this date with plans & etc." The structures were completed a year later in November of 1899.

Building encroachments onto public property, a fairly common practice in New York City during the nineteenth century, became an increasingly debated topic at the turn of the century, as evidenced by the numerous lawsuits filed and by discussions in such periodicals as Real Estate Record & Guide. A lawsuit was brought against Clarence True, after the completion of the houses at Riverside Drive and West 83rd Street, by the adjacent property owner, Charlotte Y. Ackerman, who had purchased from True the lot to the south of the group. Ackerman's case argued that the projecting bays, bowfronts and stoops on the houses next to her property were illegal encroachments upon the public street which also diminished the value of her property through the obstruction of her view, light, and air. Ackerman won the case in 1903 on appeal to the New York State Court of Appeals, which reversed the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court's finding in favor of True. The court ruled that New York City's ownership of streets from property line to property line was "inalienable," that an encroachment was an "appropriation of the public street for private purposes," and that no individual or agency had the authority to permit encroachments onto public property. Thus the owners of the five houses in the group facing Riverside

Drive had to remove the projections on their buildings.

In 1911 the main facades of these houses were completely removed and rebuilt to follow the diagonal of the Riverside Drive property lines. No. 103 and No. 104, both altered by the architectural firm of Clinton & Russell, and No. 107-109, altered by Tracy, Swartwout & Litchfield, were rebuilt using the original materials and retaining many architectural elements; No. 105 received a new facade designed by Bosworth & Holden. No. 332 West 83rd Street and the West 83rd Street facade of No. 107-109 remained unaltered as they do not face onto the Drive and were thus apparently not subject to the lawsuit. The sixth house at 102 Riverside Drive, to the south of the existing group, was later demolished for a corner apartment building, built in 1932.

The 103 Riverside Drive House¹⁵

The 103 Riverside Drive House was purchased in 1906 by Elbridge Gerry Snow, Jr., and his wife, Maud; Snow was a prominent banker, broker, and insurance businessman. An application (Alt. 2773-1910) was filed for alterations in November of 1910; the changes were carried out by the well-known architectural firm of Clinton & Russell in 1911. Clinton & Russell, founded in 1894 by Charles William Clinton (1838-1910) and William Hamilton Russell (1856-1907), was responsible for numerous buildings in New York City including early skyscrapers, luxury apartment houses, institutions, and fashionable hotels. The firm continued under that name until 1940; both founding architects were deceased when this alteration took place. The choice of Clinton & Russell was due, undoubtedly, to the influence of next-door neighbor Frederick W. Winterburn, an architect who worked for the firm, which also altered his house at No. 104. By April of 1911 the property was purchased by Amelia Bingham, an immensely popular actress and the first American female theatrical producer. She resided there until her death in 1927. The house was converted to a multiple dwelling in 1929.

The original design for the L-shaped 103 Riverside Drive House featured a four-story bowfront capped by a steeply pitched tile roof with a gabled dormer, and a side courtyard. The main facade was dismantled in 1911 and rebuilt using the original materials, with some modifications made (particularly after an amendment was filed in September of 1911), as a flat wall following the diagonal of the property line. Two bays wide, the facade is faced with tan Roman ironspot brick and limestone trim. Original elements re-worked into the design were the watertable, the round-arched recessed entranceway with carved limestone reveals and the ground-story window (both with keyed surrounds and, respectively, a glass and wrought-iron door and decorative wrought-iron grille), the pedimented second-story windows, and the round-arched fourth-story windows with keystones. A cornice, similar to the original, was added to the facade. Surviving roof elements include the majority of the peaked red tile roof, part of the south end-wall chimney, a dormer with a broken scroll pediment at the courtyard end, and the south end-wall gable capped by a finial and an urn. The original design was further modified by the insertion of a tripartite window with a keyed surround at the third story which originally had a pair of flat-arched windows with voussoirs.¹⁶ In addition, the wall was extended

upward one story and the dormer was rebuilt to meet the new wall plane; the dormer has a pair of windows framed by pilasters and surmounted by a cornice and a pediment with a cartouche. At the south, where there was originally a courtyard, a wall was constructed at the building line which contains a round-arched opening with a decorative wrought-iron gate and is surmounted by a parapet with a wrought-iron security fence; a new ground-story service entrance addition was inserted here. The original courtyard facades survive and continue the general scheme of window surrounds: both pedimented and molded lintels on the second story, flat arches with voussoirs on the third story and gable, and fourth-story round arches with keystones. More recent alterations have been the removal of a parapet above the main entrance and of front dormer finials, the replacement of all one-over-one double-hung wood sash windows with mostly single-pane aluminum sash, and the installation of four through-the-wall air conditioners on the south facade, a large flagpole on the second story, and large lamps flanking the entrance.

No. 103, incorporating the work of two architectural firms in the house of 1898-99 and its 1910-11 alteration, basically remains a modified version of the original picturesque Elizabethan Revival design.

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NOTES

1. This section adapted from LPC, Riverside-West End Historic District Designation Report (LP-1626), (New York, 1989); and LPC, Prentiss Residence Designation Report (LP-1715), report prepared by Margaret M. Pickart (New York, 1991). The information on Riverside Park and Drive was adapted from LPC, Riverside Drive and Riverside Park Designation Report, (New York, 1980); and Department of Parks and Recreation, Riverside Park - Evolution and Restoration, (New York, 1984).
2. Additional changes to the park have been made over the years. Monuments and sculptures were added beginning in the early 1900s, and the railroad tracks were covered, the Henry Hudson Parkway constructed (1934-37), playing fields added, and the park replanted under the administration of Robert Moses.
3. Other sections of the road remained incomplete until 1900-02 when the viaduct at 96th Street was built.
4. A later extension of the Drive resumes north of the viaduct, meeting Fort Washington Park at 158th Street.

5. New York Herald, August 1890, cited in LPC, Riverside-West 105th Street Historic District Designation Report (LP-0323), (New York, 1973), 3.
6. Clarence True, [A True History of] Riverside Drive (New York, 1899), n.p.
7. The information in this section is derived from: LPC, 520 West End Avenue Residence Designation Report (LP-1693), report prepared by Jay Shockley (New York, 1988).
8. New York Illustrated, (New York, 1895), 90.
9. True, n.p.
10. "Some Recently Built West Side Houses," Real Estate Record & Guide 51, Supplement (Jan. 28, 1893).
11. "Literary Notes," Architecture and Building 19 (Oct. 14, 1893), 191.
12. A History of Real Estate, Building & Architecture, 233.
13. James Ward, Architects in Practice, New York City, 1900-1940 (New York, 1989), 78.
14. This section was compiled from the following sources: NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Plans Permits and Dockets, Block 1245, Lots 1 and 43-46; "Encroachments in Front of Buildings," REG 86 (Oct. 22, 1910), 660; and Charlotte Y. Ackerman v. Clarence F. True, 175 N.Y. Rep. 353 (1903).
15. This section was compiled from the following sources: NYC, Dept. of Buildings; NY County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds & Conveyances; NYC Directories, 1910s; True, n.p. [Photograph of the buildings under construction]; NYC, Dept. of Taxes Photograph Collection; Elbridge G. Snow, Jr. Obituary, NYT, Dec. 30, 1941, p. 19; "Amelia Bingham," National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York: James T. White & Co.); and "Clinton & Russell," LPC, Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report (LP-1647), (New York, 1990), A29.
16. This modification was made between 1911 and c. 1940, as evidenced by the 1911 alteration drawings and a Dept. of Taxes photograph.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

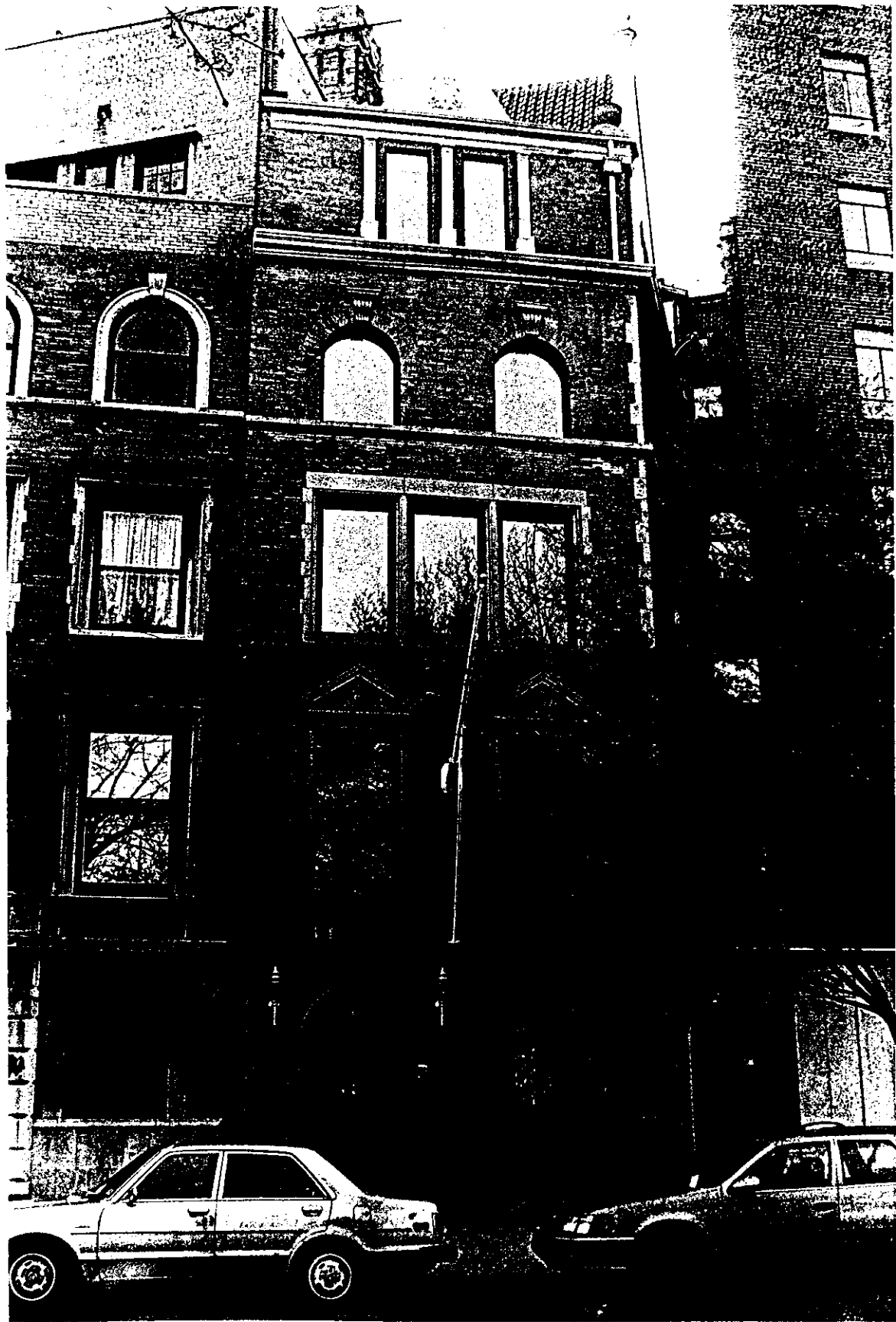
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 103 Riverside Drive House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 103 Riverside Drive House, built in 1898-99, was originally designed by well-known Upper West Side architect and developer Clarence F. True who was largely responsible for promoting the development and establishing the character of lower Riverside Drive; that this structure was built on speculation for True's development firm as one house of a picturesque group of six houses on the southeast corner of Riverside Drive and West 83rd Street, which are the northernmost of True's designs along Riverside Drive; that, designed in True's signature "Elizabethan Revival" style based on French and English Renaissance prototypes, this house is architecturally significant and as one of the five extant houses in this group it represents the first period of the Drive's development; that the L-shaped house is distinguished by such picturesque elements as contrasting tan Roman ironspot brick and limestone facing, round-arched and rectangular windows with keyed surrounds, side courtyard facades, decorative ironwork, dormers, and a tile roof; that the house was originally designed with a projecting bowfront and a low stoop, features which (along with those of the adjacent houses) became the focus of an interesting lawsuit in 1903 concerning permanent encroachments onto public streets and places that resulted in the alteration of the house; and that in 1911 (for the owner Amelia Bingham, an immensely popular actress) the bowfront was removed and the main facade was rebuilt with the original materials to follow the diagonal of the Riverside Drive property line by the firm of Clinton & Russell so that today, although the house reflects the work of two architectural firms, it basically remains a modified version of the original picturesque Elizabethan Revival design.

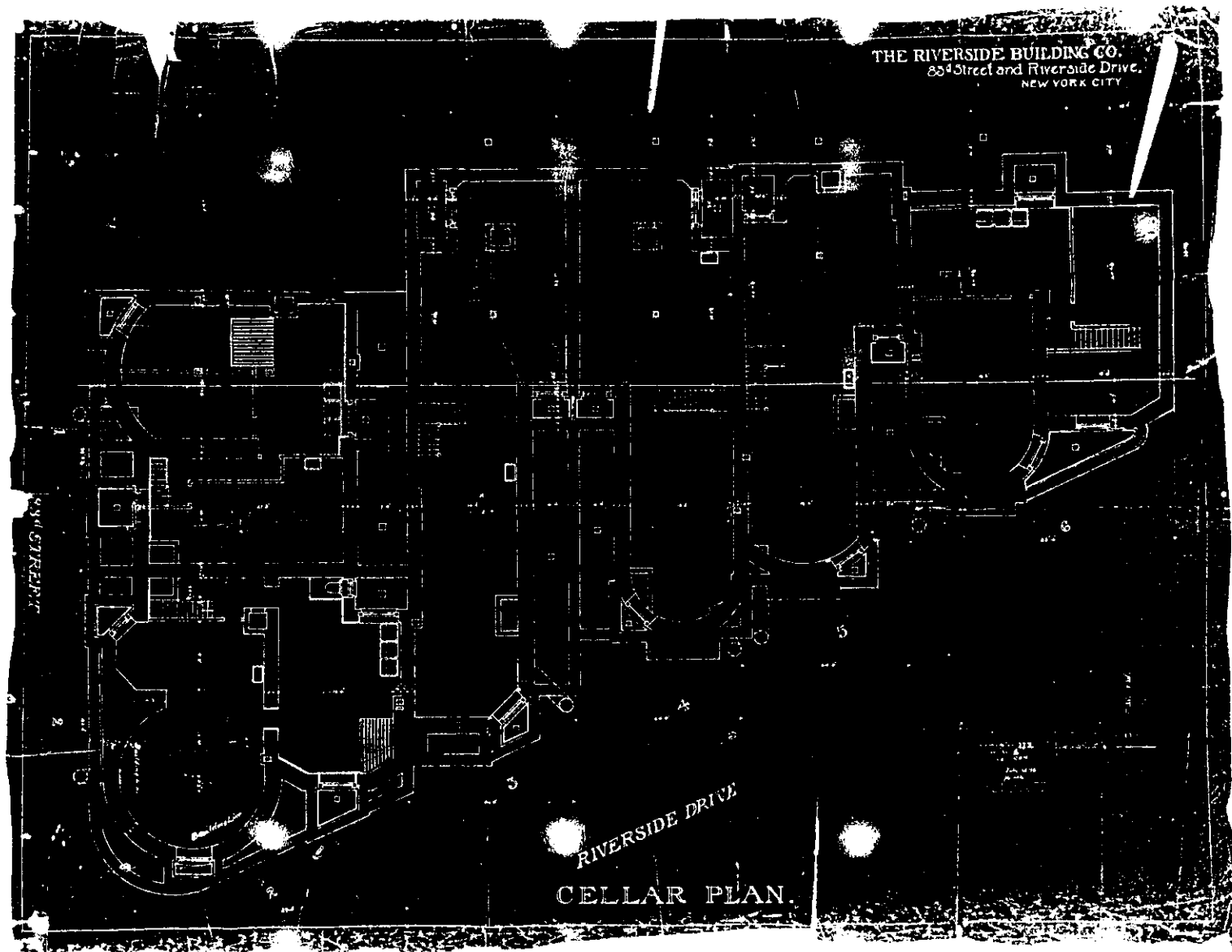
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 103 Riverside Drive House, 103 Riverside Drive, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1245, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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103 Riverside Drive House
Architect: Clarence True
Built: 1898-99
Photo: Carl Forster



Original Plans by Clarence True

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



103-107 Riverside Drive
and 332 West 83rd Street Houses
Historical Photograph c. 1940
View of Facades

Photo Credit: Municipal Archives
City of New York, Dept. of Taxes
Collection