

439 WEST 24TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Erected 1849-50.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 722, Lot 16.

On April 28, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 439 West 24th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 20). 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. The owner of the house has informed the Commission that he favors its designation as a Landmark.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

No. 439 West 24th Street was erected by Philo V. Beebe, a neighborhood builder, as part of a long row of handsome, mid-19th century three-story houses. Set behind landscaped front yards, 15 feet deep, the row now affords a welcome contrast to the towering, sixteen-story London Terrace apartments across the street. By comparison, the houses retain an appealing sense of human scale.

These dignified residences were part of the expanding Chelsea community. This included, at the time of construction, an imposing row of earlier Greek Revival residences--the original London Terrace--on the north side of 23rd Street, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues and, back to back with it, the modest Gothic Revival row houses known as Chelsea Cottages, on the south side of 24th Street. These narrow little houses, built primarily to house the people employed by the well-to-do merchants on 23rd Street, were erected three years before Nos. 437-459 West 24th Street. The latter were built in response to a need for more housing in the area for business and professional people.

The row was erected by Beebe, the builder, in association with Beverly Robinson, counsellor-at-law, who had owned the land since December 14, 1820, and George F. Talman, who acquired it on April 24, 1849. Robinson, however, retained an interest in the property while the houses were under construction. Beverly Robinson (1779-1857) was closely associated, both as a friend and as an attorney, with successive generations of the Clarke and Moore families, heirs of the estate once known as Chelsea Farm. From 1817 through the early 1830s Robinson gradually expanded his holdings in the area. Both he and Clement Clarke Moore served for four decades as trustees of Columbia College.

In 1849-50, at the time of their erection, the residences at Nos. 437-459 West 24th Street were among the large and imposing houses in the area. Originally, the row consisted of twelve individual brick houses, later reduced to eleven after Nos. 443 and 445 were combined. They were built as six pairs, with doorways and stoops adjoining in neighborly fashion, resulting in the sharing of the center handrailing. Transitional in style, the houses display an interesting combination of features from both the earlier Greek Revival and newer Italianate modes. The basic proportions, however, are Greek Revival. Later 19th century modifications to some of the houses introduced Neo-Grec and Queen Anne features, followed by the popular neo-Federal style of the 20th century. Thus, they represent more than a century of architectural development. In general, the houses retain their setback behind front yards, their original height, bold, modillioned roof cornices and ironwork--characteristics which contribute to the unity of the row, as a very special feature of the neighborhood and of Manhattan.

No. 439 West 24th Street, erected in 1849-50, is set behind a well-designed continuous iron railing which links it with No. 437. The front yard, planted with a privet hedge and two ailanthus trees, is sunk two steps below street level. Constructed of brick, this house has a high stoop and the original doorway enframingent. It retains its long parlor-floor windows and most of its fine ironwork at the stoop, cast in an attractive variant of the Italianate style of the 1850s. A little urn still surmounts the left-hand newel-post; however, the volutes between the handrailing and the risers have disappeared as the result of a remodeling of the stoop. The narrow four-paneled door, glazed at the top, is similar to the one at No. 441 and features a sunburst design. The

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bold, modillioned roof cornice is typical of the Italianate period. The brickwork of the house has been sandblasted. In May 1851 George W. Gray, merchant of 32 Washington Square, whose wife owned No. 441, purchased the house from the builder as an investment.

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 439 West 24th 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 439 West 24th Street House was erected by Philo V. Beebe as one of a dignified row of twelve residences which combines features of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, that it is an extension of an earlier, consciously planned community and that the uniform setback behind planted front yards and the generally uniform cornice line provide a welcome sense of human scale in a streetscape dominated by large housing developments.

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 439 West 24th Street House, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 722, Lot 16, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.