

443-445 WEST 24TH STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Erected 1849-50.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 722, Lot 13.

On April 28, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 443-445 West 24th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 22). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation of this house and the ten other houses which form the row, Nos. 437-459 West 24th Street. Manhattan Community Board #4 has urged the designation of this house. Its designation is strongly supported by the West 24th-25th Streets Block Association and the Chelsea Historic District Council.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

No. 443-445 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 front yards, 15 feet deep, the row now affords a welcome contrast to the 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 (a builder who was active in the development of Greenwich Village as well as in Chelsea) in association with Beverly Robinson, who had owned the land since May 17, 1820, and George F. Talman, who acquired it on April 24, 1849. It is clear, however, from both the tax records and subsequent deeds, that Robinson retained a part interest in the property while the houses were under construction. Beverly Robinson (1779-1857) was a highly respected attorney established in the City since 1801. He was closely associated, both as a friend and as an attorney, with successive generations of the Clarke and Moore families, which had inherited the estate once known as Chelsea Farm through the will of Mary Clarke, the widow of Capt. Thomas Clarke. In 1817, Beverly Robinson acquired property in the block bounded by Ninth and Tenth Avenues, between 24th and 25th Streets, in return for a debt owed him by Thomas B. Clarke, Mary's grandson. He subsequently expanded his holdings in the area. Robinson was intimately associated with another Clarke grandson, Clement Clarke Moore, during the long years when both served as trustees of Columbia College, Moore from 1813-57 and Robinson from 1817-54. Robinson was Chairman of the Board of Trustees during the last four years of his tenure. His interest in Columbia was inherited from Beverly Robinson, his grandfather, Governor of King's College, 1764-1770, and his father, class of 1773. The Robinsons' activities in connection with Columbia are documented in a book published by the college, Officers and Graduates of Columbia College, 1754-1894, and by references to the son in George Templeton Strong's Diary. Robinson died at his home in New Brighton, Staten Island, on August 14, 1857, after a long and distinguished career in law and public service.

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

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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. 443-445 West 24th Street, erected in 1849-50, has a large ailanthus tree growing in its front yard. Originally, this building constructed of brick, consisted of two houses: No. 443, which was paired with No. 441, and No. 445, paired with No. 447. Set behind a simple, low yard railing which separates the yard from the street, the building retains the fine proportions and roofline of its neighbors. The window alignments of the upper stories remain as they were; only the sills of the parlor-story windows have been raised, creating recessed brick spandrels under each window. The squareheaded windows have double-hung sash. The handsome, modillioned roof cornice, typical of the Italianate style, remains in place. In spite of modifications, including the introduction of basement entrances, this house with its uniform setback, roofline, materials, proportions and decorative features remains an integral part of the row. Its removal or the alteration of the setback or roofline of this building would destroy the character of the entire row. This would seriously affect the appearance of this street which owes its distinction, in large measure, to the survival, intact, of this dignified row of eleven houses with their many uniform features.

Of exceptional interest are the traces on No. 443-445 of the original profile of the stone window lintels which indicate that the window lintels of the entire row, covered in almost every other instance by metal cornices, were originally Greek Revival in style, with cap moldings. The two simple entrance doorways at basement level are in character. The original owners of the building were George Warner (No. 445) and Reid R. Throckmorton (No. 443), who purchased the properties from Robinson and Talman in March 1850. Warner, who occupied his house for several years from 1851 on, was a coal merchant at 660 Hudson Street. Throckmorton, who lived on Horatio Street, owned a large planing mill on Bank Street near West Street.

This house, and the row of which it is a part, bear witness to the rapid expansion and urbanization of the City in the mid-19th century. A comparison of maps of 1839 and 1854 clearly shows that the area above 23rd Street near the Hudson River had changed dramatically in the course of fifteen years. In 1839, it was still undeveloped farmland, and the east bank of the Hudson River, at 24th Street, extended along what later became the west side of Tenth Avenue, after the water lots were filled in. By 1854, the large open areas occupied by stone cutters, lumber and coal yards and the small frame houses, which dotted the streets, were being rapidly replaced by substantial brick dwellings of which Nos. 437-459 are such fine examples. The first owners and occupants of two of these houses, Nos. 449 and 453, were a neighborhood lumber dealer and a contractor, both of whom may well have been involved in the construction of No. 443-445 and the other houses of the row. From the beginning these houses and their occupants were intimately associated with the expansion of the Chelsea community.

No. 443-445 is, therefore, an intrinsic and inseparable part of the historical development of a neighborhood, with local traditions. Any significant alteration to this house would break the thread of historical continuity, destroy an important and handsome feature of the neighborhood and lead to a loss of understandable pride on the part of the owners of the ten other houses of the row. Moreover, since No. 443-445 occupies the space of two houses, it functions as a particularly important part of the row and interacts with the other ten houses. Nothing should be allowed to destroy the visual and architectural unity, which characterizes this outstanding row of eleven houses on the north side of 24th Street--houses which, chiefly by virtue of their intimate scale and uniform setbacks, vividly recall the life and the architecture of another age.

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 443-445 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 443-445 West 24th Street House was erected by Philo V. Beebe as part 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 planned community, that the uniform setback behind front yards and the generally uniform cornice line provide a welcome sense of human scale in a streetscape dominated by large housing developments and that this building contributes to the present attractive appearance of this handsome row of houses.

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 443-445 West 24th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 722, Lot 13, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.