

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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FRENCH EMBASSY: CULTURAL, PRESS & INFO. SERVICES

PAYNE WHITNEY HOUSE (Now a Division of the French Embassy), 972 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1902, completed 1906; architects McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1393, Lot 72.

On June 23, 1970 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Payne Whitney House (now a Division of the French Embassy) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 43). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. At the public hearing, Manhattan Community Board #8 informed the Commission that it favored the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This mansion stands out on its own architectural merit, on the last remaining blockfront of imposing town houses on Fifth Avenue. The gracious curve of the light gray granite front, about forty feet wide, rises through five stories and is emphasized by entablatures between the stories. The pitched tile roof has a deep overhanging stone cornice supported on paired stone brackets; it further emphasizes the curve of the facade.

The house was designed in the style of the high Italian Renaissance by McKim, Mead & White. The entrance floor, near sidewalk level, is of rusticated stone. The dignified central doorway has a richly carved marble enframing. The double entrance doors consist of openwork bronze grilles with an intricate floral motif. Above the entrance floor, a delicately carved wave molding, resting on a dentil molding, is an inspired contrast to the rectilinear rustications below. The parlor floor provides variety with round-arched windows. Winged cherubs fill the spandrels. Paired Ionic pilasters flank these windows, and the next two stories have a similar treatment with modified Corinthian pilasters. The square-headed windows at the third story are surmounted by high relief swags, while at the next story these spaces are occupied by delicately carved classic figures in low relief. The square attic windows are flanked by carved vertical panels, which skillfully make a transition from the pilasters below to the roof brackets above. The brackets end in carved lions' heads.

The same character of a richly ornamented Renaissance facade is continued along the south side of the mansion, where a handsome forward-projecting central section of the wall stands forth in a perfect setting of greenward.

The house was designed for the town residence of Payne Whitney, on land given to him by his uncle Oliver H. Payne. Colonel Payne, who had been an officer in the Civil War, was a financier and yachtsman and is best remembered as the benefactor instrumental in establishing the Cornell University Medical College in New York City.

Payne Whitney, also a financier, was well-known for his racing and breeding stables on Long Island and in Kentucky. Likewise a philanthropist, he left a large bequest to the New York Hospital. Early in 1902, the year in which construction of this house commenced, Mr. Whitney married Helen Hay, daughter of John Hay, who was Secretary of State under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt. Mrs. Whitney was a poet and a major donor to the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art. As a widow, she continued to reside in this house until her death in 1944. Their daughter Joan, wife of Charles S. Payson, is well-known today as owner of the New York Mets.

The Republic of France has been the owner of this impressive mansion since 1952.

PAYNE WHITNEY HOUSE

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 Payne Whitney House (now a Division of the French Embassy) 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 Payne Whitney House is one of the adornments of Fifth Avenue and one of the last reminders of the Age of Elegance, that it is architecturally distinguished in itself, that it is an integral part of the last complete block of impressive town houses remaining on the Avenue and that it was for many years the home of a well-known New York family.

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 Payne Whitney House (now a Division of the French Embassy), 972 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1393, Lot 72, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.