

679 LAFAYETTE AVENUE HOUSE (Magnolia Grandiflora), Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1880-1883.
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 1785, Lot 161 in part.

On May 10, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 679 Lafayette Avenue House (Magnolia Grandiflora) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 3). 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.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome neo-Grec residence, which was built in the early 1880s, faces the north side of Tompkins Park from Lafayette Avenue. It is located in an area that was formerly the old village of Bedford which was incorporated into the City of Brooklyn in 1834. The park is one of the original eleven parks or squares in the 1839 Brooklyn city plan. A commission was authorized in 1835 to lay out streets, avenues, and squares in the expanding City of Brooklyn, taking into consideration the proposed suggestions of a Citizens' Committee. Tompkins Park was undoubtedly named for Daniel D. Tompkins (1774-1825), Governor of New York State and Vice President of the United States, 1817-1825. He was a forceful advocate of liberal reform measures and served valiantly in directing the defense of the New York area during the War of 1812.

Tompkins Park was not developed until after 1868, the year it was placed under the jurisdiction of the Brooklyn Park Commission which had been authorized in 1859. In the early 1870s the Commissioners secured an appropriation of \$25,000 to fill in and grade the lots for the park. Between 1868 and 1873 the noted landscape architects Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted were charged with the responsibility of designing a number of local parks in the Brooklyn park system. Tompkins Park is one of their most formal but tasteful designs, which has retained much of its original character as an urban park. According to Elizabeth Barlow (Frederick Law Olmsted's New York), the "arrangement satisfied two clienteles of the park: the homeowners who looked out upon it had a cheerful and agreeable gardenlike view, and the general strolling public could be accommodated in its shady interior."

The residential development of Bedford took place mainly from the 1860s through the 1890s when many private residences were constructed. William and Henrietta Lemken purchased enough property in the late 1870s to build the present rowhouses at 678 and 679 Lafayette Avenue in the early 1880s. The two houses were built at the same time between 1880 and 1883. The 1880 Atlas of the City of Brooklyn shows vacant lots on the site, but William Lemken is recorded in the Brooklyn directory as residing at 679 Lafayette Avenue by May 1, 1883. In various years William Lemken is listed as being in the hotel and liquor business at 202 South Street, New York City. The Lemken family owned this house until 1900.

Three stories in height, above a high basement, this brownstone house is a very fine example of the neo-Grec style. The neo-Grec, a style which generally superseded the French Second Empire style, substituted simple incised curvilinear ornament for the rich three-dimensional carving of the Italianate and the French Second Empire styles. Such motifs as sea shells, rosettes, and bosses of various types, grooves reminiscent of the Greek triglyph and pedimental lintels with acroteria at the ends became, in their much simplified forms, the ornament of this new style. It first appeared in the 1870s but continued on almost unchanged into the 1890s, especially in areas outside of Manhattan. This accounts for the rather late date of this building in Brooklyn.

At the basement the smooth-faced stone-work is defined by two narrow ornamental band courses. The upper one has bevel moldings flanking a broad central band with evenly spaced bosses overlapping the bevel molds. The lower one utilizes vertical groove type ornament. The basement windows have lintels with curved ends similar to corbels in form. The high stoop, at the left side, with round-nosed treads lacks at present the cast-iron handrails with large balusters and the massive ornate newel posts which once graced them. A yard railing of wrought iron has a gateway with slender cast-iron posts. The entrance doorway at the left-hand side is balanced by the two windows to the right of it while the upper floors each have three evenly spaced windows, the left-hand ones being centered above the doorway. The windows diminish in height as they ascend: each richly adorned window enframing repeats, at smaller scale, the enframing which surrounds the entrance door.

This arched doorway, with keystone and ornamental triangular panels in the spandrels, is flanked by pilasters which have triple grooves beginning at mid-height and extending up to the brackets which support the lintel and also flank the transom set in the arch of the doorway above the space designed to accommodate paired doors. They rest on shallow corbelled bases with three guttae on the underside which give emphasis and weight to these supporting members. The brackets themselves have shell type motifs resting on the stepped bases and the lower portions of the shells project outward in a manner reminiscent of the bottom volutes of conventional vertically-placed console brackets. Instead of the grooved curvilinear portion of the classical console bracket, there is an innovative, straight section, sloping outward at the top; each has a single grooved channel enhanced by the introduction of a delicate bead molding which extends for the entire length. Instead of the conventional large scroll at the top of this grooved section, incised ornament. These are crowned, in turn, by low conventional moldings similar to pilaster caps. On these crowning members, above the brackets, rests the projecting lintel of the doorway set directly above the arch.

The heavy stone lintel which dominates the doorway is an interesting variation on the usual sloping neo-Grec pedimental form. Here the top is level but has a low-arched central portion beneath which is carved a shell motif which complements the keystone of the arch below it. It is flanked on each side by striking incised linear ornament and is surmounted by acroteria tied to it visually by means of incised volutes.

The window enframements, quite similar to the door enframement but at smaller scale, rest on projecting sills supported on corbel blocks. The first floor windows differ from those at the upper floors in being supported on brackets which repeat the bead molding theme of the doorway brackets. These brackets flank handsome panels with back to back plume motifs incised in them. The facade is crowned by an imposing wooden roof cornice which, like the window enframements, displays a bold array of neo-Grec elements. The cyma recta molding of the cornice proper is supported on closely spaced brackets which repeat the triple groove motif, seen below, on their outward sloping surfaces. These brackets are set on stepped corbels with guttae suspended beneath the lowest step. At the top they have flat-faced heads with v-shaped prongs and are ornamented with floral motifs. A narrow band course connects the bottoms of these brackets and between them are rectangular panels with concave cuts at the four corners. It is in just such innovations as these that we sense the freedom from precedent which was introduced with the neo-Grec style.

The overall effect of this facade is heavy and imposing but is relieved by the sparkle of light and shade derived from the incised cutting of the ornament so typical of the neo-Grec. The smooth ashlar of the brownstone walls further contrasts with the rich ornamental door and window enframements and the cornice.

A movement begun by Mrs. Hattie Carthan, affectionately known as "the tree lady", in the early 1950s to save the Magnolia Grandiflora resulted in its designation as a Landmark and in the construction of a protective wing-wall of masonry to the north. The wall was built as the result of an extensive study conducted by the Commission aided by horticultural experts. This tree belongs to the most beautiful of the North American magnolia species, the Magnolia Grandiflora; it is a "laurel magnolia", an evergreen tree which grows to a height of over seventy feet. It is located directly in front of this house, the easternmost of the three houses which have protected the tree for many years. This protection has enabled the tree to grow to its present great size.

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 679 Lafayette Avenue House (Magnolia Grandiflora) 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 679 Lafayette Avenue House is a very fine example of the neo-Grec style, that it has particularly rich incised ornament, that it faces Tompkins Park which was planned by Olmsted and Vaux, and that the house has helped to protect the Magnolia Grandiflora tree, a designated New York City Landmark -- a unique example of the relationship between the built and natural environments.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter B-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 679 Lafayette Avenue House (Magnolia Grandiflora) and designates as its related Landmark site that part of the Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1785, Lot 161 on which the described building is situated.