

CIVIC CLUB (Estonian House), 243 East 34th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1898-99; architect Thomas A. Gray.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 915, Lot 26.

On January 10, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Civic Club (Estonian House) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). On that date the hearing was continued to March 14, 1978 (Item No. 9). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation at the two hearings. There was one speaker in opposition to the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The elegant building of the Civic Club, now known as Estonian House, was designed in the French Beaux-Arts style by Thomas A. Gray. Erected in 1898-99, the Civic Club building was commissioned by Frederick Norton Goddard (1861-1905), the founder of the club and a leading social reformer in the city.

The son of J. Warren Goddard, a wealthy businessman and owner of a successful drygoods firm, F. N. Goddard joined the family business after graduating from Harvard in 1882. Shortly after his father's death, however, he left the firm and moved to a tenement at 327 East 33rd Street, where he lived with an old and trusted servant. This part of the city was then dominated by the working class. Several factories were near East 33rd Street and along the East River were rail and lumber yards as well as ferry landings. It was Goddard's intention to devote himself to helping the less fortunate in this neighborhood. He soon joined a small group of men, who worked as ferry boatmen, plasterers, and bricklayers, and who formed the nucleus of what was to become "one of the most hope-inspiring organizations in the city."¹ This group met regularly near the house of "Captain" Goddard, as he was known, and eventually formed the Civic Club, the purpose of which was to:

...render personal service as well as pecuniary aid to anybody needing it within the district they [the members] regarded as their own, bordered by Fourth Avenue, 42nd Street, the East River and 23rd Street.²

Goddard commissioned Brooklyn architect Thomas A. Gray to design the impressive clubhouse at 243 East 34th Street.

Just a few houses away, at 217 East 34th Street, stood the East Side Republican Club, another neighborhood organization launched by Goddard. In 1899 he became the Republican leader in his local district, and during the next five years he made a number of political reforms. Another successful campaign of Goddard was his fight against the form of gambling, known as the "policy game," at the turn of the century. He helped found the Anti-Policy Society, and his greatest triumph was the arrest of Al Adams, the "Policy King," in 1901.

Goddard had married Alice S. Winthrop in 1899 and moved from his tenement on 33rd Street to a more fashionable town house at 36th Street and Lexington Avenue. Despite his deep commitment to social and political reform, Goddard was, nonetheless, a member of several traditional and affluent men's clubs and also owned a country house in Litchfield, Connecticut. It was there that he died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 44.

The Civic Club building remained in the Goddard family until 1946, when the Estate of Alice Goddard sold the property to the Estonian Educational Society, Inc., which still owns the building today. Founded in 1929, the Estonian Educational Society sponsors a variety of activities for Estonian-Americans in the New York area, including a senior citizen's club, folk dance, and singing groups, gymnastic classes, and courses for young children in the history of Estonia. Now known as Estonian House, or "Eesti Maja" in Estonian, the building houses a number of Estonian organizations, such as the Estonian Relief Committee.

This elegant four-story high limestone and brick building is similar in proportion and detail to many of the opulent Beaux-Arts private residences erected in New York at the turn of the century. The facade is enriched with a variety of decorative features which give the building a luxurious character. The facade of the Civic Club must have impressed and inspired the members of the Club.

The rusticated first story is composed of three round-arched openings; the doorway is at the left, with two windows to the right of it. The entrance with a double door has a round-arched transom, similar to that above each of the windows, and is surmounted by a scrolled keystone, like that above the window to the right. Elaborately crowning the central window of the first story is a handsome cartouche surrounded by foliate ornament.

At the second story, the bowed central window with double French doors has a carved enframingent and opens onto a wrought-iron balcony. Centered above this window, the carved inscription, "Civic Club," is set off by shell ornaments. Ionic pilasters with pendants flank the narrower side windows which have sills on small brackets and cornice slabs carried on elongated brackets with pendants. The wall surface at either side of these windows is of gray brick which subtly contrasts with the limestone. Above this story a cornice with egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings follows the curve of the bowed windows and is surmounted by a balustrade. At the third story which is faced with gray brick, the three windows with eared enframingents have scrolled keystones and are connected by a band course at impost block level.

The handsome modillioned roof cornice above the third floor is crowned by a stone balustrade. The steeply pitched copper mansard roof rises behind the balustrade and is pierced by three dormer windows. The elaborate limestone central dormer continues the visual emphasis of the central bay of the facade. The large square-headed window of the dormer, with smooth enframingent enhanced by a delicate interior molding, is surmounted by a segmental-arched pediment with a broken bed. The tympanum is embellished with a cartouche similar to the one crowning the central window of the ground floor. The dormer is further distinguished by intricately carved volutes flanking its base. To either side are simple bull's-eye windows ornamented with flanking pendants and arcoteria at the apex. The party walls and coping of the roof are finished with molded limestone.

Although the character of the neighborhood has changed greatly since the founding of the Civic Club, its building continues to serve a vital purpose as Estonian House. Moreover, the handsome building adds character and grace to its surroundings and survives as an elegant example of Beaux-Arts Design.

FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, May 29, 1905, p. 1.
2. New York Times, May 29, 1905, p. 1.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Civic Club (Estonian 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 Civic Club (Estonian House) is a handsome example of the Beaux-Arts style, that it was designed by architect T.A. Gray for the philanthropist F. Norton Goddard, that it was built to house the organization known as the Civic Club, founded by Goddard to improve the living conditions of the neighborhood residents, and that the building now serves as a center for Estonian cultural and educational activities.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 Civic Club (Estonian House), 243 East 34th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 915, Lot 26, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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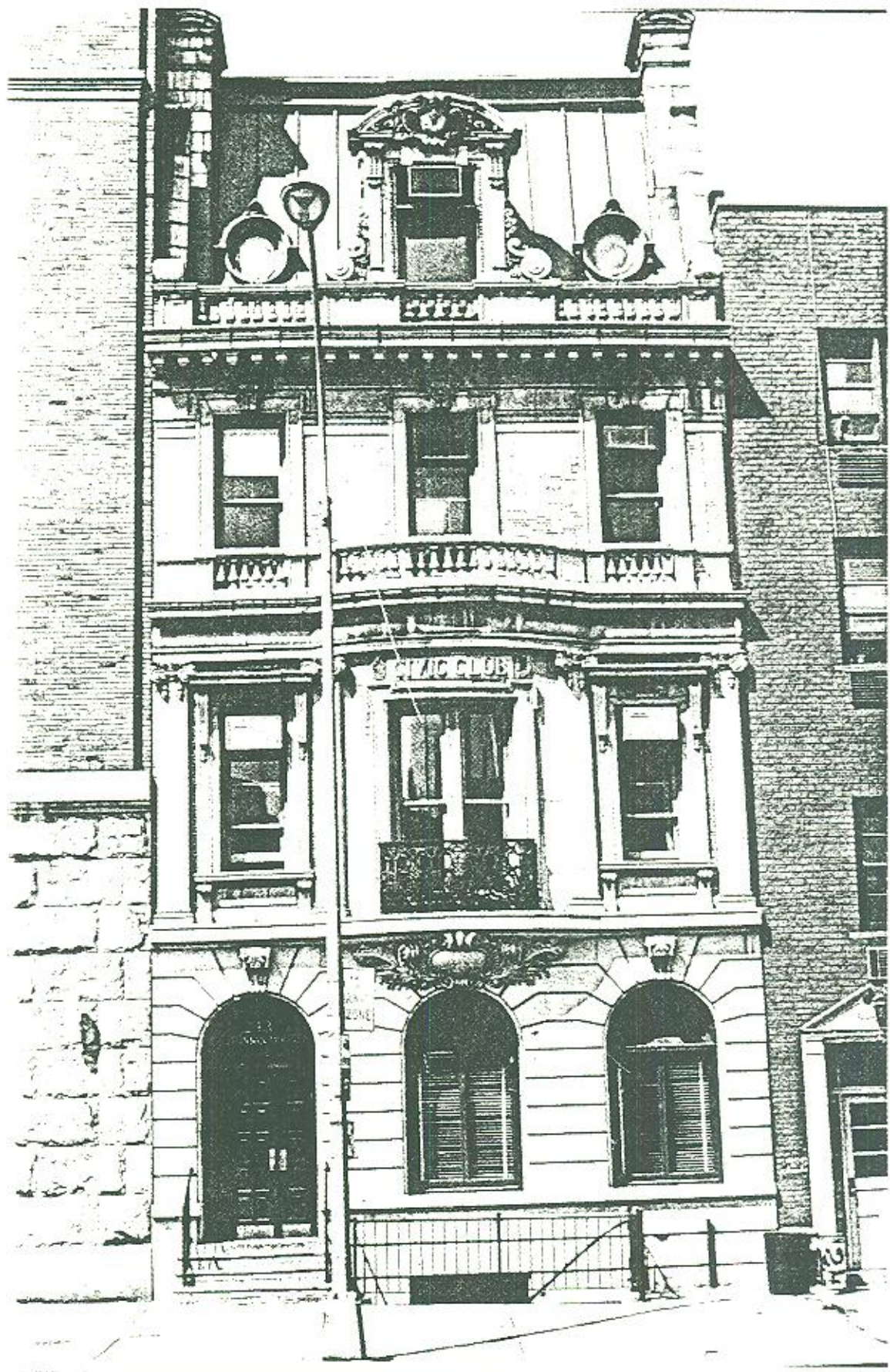
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CIVIC CLUB (ESTONIAN HOUSE)
243 EAST 34th STREET

DATE: 1898-99
ARCHITECT: Thomas A. Gray