

1966

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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DEVINNE PRESS BUILDING, 393-399 Lafayette Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Completed 1885; architects Babb, Cook & Willard.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 544, Lot 1.

On March 8, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Devinne Press Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 25). Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The owner asked for a delay in the hearing and the Commission continued the public hearing until April 12, 1966 (Item No.5). At that time two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The attorney for the owner opposed designation. The Commission received several letters favoring designation. Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

As a commercial structure the Devinne Press Building established a milestone both aesthetically and structurally for American commercial buildings in New York City. This eight story brick structure with terra-cotta trim, designed in the Romanesque style, is a bold example of architectural inventiveness wedded to commercial enterprise. As a masonry bearing-wall elevator building of the 1880's prior to the introduction of skeleton steel construction that was to follow, it has great architectural distinction and prestige. It was the forerunner of a good number of commercial buildings which were considerably influenced by its design.

Solid in mass and sound in construction, the architectural elements, displayed in its two fronts, have unusual cohesion and unity in their composition. The elevations display interesting contrasts of round and segmental arch windows. Particularly handsome features of this building are the three story high deeply recessed window arches and the corner treatment (quoins) at the rounded corner of the building. The low pitched roof expressed by a brick gable-end and round arched attic windows is a pleasing feature of this dignified commercial brick building.

Talbot Hamlin, the architectural historian, refers to the Devinne Press building as "an exquisitely and originally detailed building in brick and terra-cotta, a typical example of that flurry of real originality that eddies through much of the best building of the 1880's and 90's."

Theodore Devinne (1828-1914), for whom the Devinne Press building is named, was a noted printer. He was the most learned man of his time in the history of the art of printing and in its practice. His printing-press became prominent through the work which it did for Scribner's Monthly, St. Nicholas Magazine, and especially for the Century magazine. Devinne was a perfectionist and a meticulous workman. He printed most of the books for the Grolier Club (of which he was a founder and president). The Book of Common Prayer and the "Jade" book are two of his finest books, while the production of the Century Dictionary is considered by many critics his finest achievement. Devinne's name is likely to live longest in his writings. His major published works include: The Printers Price List, The Invention of Printing, Historic Printing Types, and The Practice of Typography (in four volumes), among many others.

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 Devinne Press Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

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The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the DeVinne Press building is an outstanding example of an 1880 American commercial building, that its excellent brick work and fine terra-cotta detail is of superior quality, that the building has great prestige and architectural distinction and that it is of historical importance as the home of one of the most noted printing establishments in the country.

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 DeVinne Press Building, 393-399 Lafayette Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 544, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.