

HARRY B. HOLLINS RESIDENCE, 12-14 West 56th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1899-1901; architect, Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1271, Lot 47.

On November 10, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Hollins Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing was continued to February 9, 1982 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the hearings. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The building at 12-14 West 56th Street, built as a residence for banker Harry B. Hollins, is among the handsomest turn-of-the-century townhouses remaining in Midtown Manhattan, and one of the few of its kind surviving from the period when the area was a residential enclave for the city's wealthy. Designed by Stanford White, of the prestigious New York firm of McKim, Mead & White, the Hollins house is an unusually fine example of the firm's work in the neo-Georgian style popular at the time of its construction.

The Site

During the first half of the 19th century, the area now known as Midtown Manhattan was gradually transformed from open farmland north of the city to a fringe area of shanty towns, stockyards, blacksmiths and similar hazardous or noxious manufacturing uses. The landscaping of Central Park begun in 1857, however, combined with the northward growth of New York on Manhattan Island, helped turn the area into a middle-class residential district, while pushing the shanty towns further northward. During the building boom that followed the Civil War, four-story brick- and brownstone-faced rowhouses went up on the streets of the West 40s and 50s, while larger mansions were erected along Fifth Avenue. By 1871, most of the lots on West 56th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues were occupied by modest rowhouses.

By 1899, the formerly middle-class nature of the West 50s had changed, and the area had become home to many of the city's most affluent citizens. Many of the facades of the older buildings from the 1860s and 1870s had lost their stoops, had been given new facades, or had been replaced altogether with more up-to-date Georgian and neo-Classical style houses. In that year, Harry B. Hollins bought the lots at Nos. 12-14, and commissioned Stanford White to design his new townhouse.

McKim, Mead & White and the Hollins Residence

Harry Bowly Hollins (1854-1938), founder of the firm of H.B. Hollins & Co., was a prominent New York banker and broker, an intimate of J.P. Morgan, and an organizer of the Knickerbocker Trust Company. Like many of his peers, he belonged

to the Metropolitan, Knickerbocker, Union, and Racquet Clubs, and kept a country home in Meadow Farm, East Islip, on Long Island.¹ At the time he bought the lots on West 56th Street, the block was becoming something of a bankers' row. His neighbors included banker Henry Seligman at No. 30 (C.P.H. Gilbert, 1899-1901), Seligman's banker brother-in-law Edward Wasserman at No. 33 (C.P.H. Gilbert, 1901-02), Arthur Lehman of Lehman Brothers at No. 31 (John Duncan, 1903-04), and Birdsell Otis Edey at No. 10 (Warren & Wetmore, 1901). All hired the most renowned architects of the day to design their new, up-to-date townhouses.

Hollin's house was originally intended to be designed with its neighbor at No. 10 as suggested by correspondence at the New-York Historical Society.² Hollins and Birdsell Otis Edey had bought the only two empty lots on the street, No. 12-14 and No. 10 respectively. Edey, however, had to delay construction of his house because of legal complications over a covenant attached to No. 10 prohibiting building out to the lot-line. The rowhouses that had gone up after the Civil War had been set back from the lot-lines and approached by stoops. As taste changed towards the end of the century, houses were built out to the lot-line, and ground-floor entrances replaced stoops. Both the Hollins house and the planned Edey house were to be built to the lot-line, but Edey's lot was under an 1881 covenant which, in the taste of the day, prohibited building out to the lot-line for twenty years. Consequently, Hollins had to build his house alone, and Edey had to wait until 1901, when the covenant expired; his new house was then designed by Warren & Wetmore.

McKim, Mead & White had been in the forefront of American architecture since its inception in 1879. By the end of the century, when Hollins turned to Stanford White for his new house, the firm had become synonymous with classically-inspired architecture, whether derived from Italian Renaissance or Georgian sources. In 1893-94, shortly before the Hollins commission, McKim Mead & White had designed the Palladian-inspired Low Library at Columbia University, and in 1897-99 the Renaissance-style University Club at 1 West 54th Street.³ From about 1890, however, the firm had also begun to explore the use of Georgian and Federal-style motifs, particularly for educational and residential buildings. Among the earliest of these was the Amory-Olney House of 1890-92 on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, inspired by Beacon Hill prototypes. The Amory-Olney House contains the germ of the design of the later Hollins Residence;⁴ while the double-house design of Boston has been translated into a single-house version, such details as the limestone basement, carved stone lunette panels, entrance, and balustrade correspond quite closely. Another related design is the James Goodwin House at 9-11 West 54th Street in New York, built in 1896-98;⁵ the rusticated basement, window treatment, and many details of the Goodwin house are similar to those of No. 12-14 West 56th Street.

Most of McKim, Mead & White's Georgian and Federal style designs of the period were the work of Charles McKim.⁶ No. 12-14 West 56th Street however, is attributed to Sanford White by his biographer Charles Baldwin, and by architectural historian Leland Roth, on the basis of correspondence between Hollins and White.⁷ J.A. Gade of the firm apparently helped supervise construction.

The Hollins Residence was completed in 1901. Hollin's firm, however, went bankrupt in 1913, and he was obliged to sell the house after only a decade of use. His creditors at the time included the estates of J.P. Morgan, William K. Vander-

bility, and Vanderbilt's daughter Consuelo, the Duchess of Manchester.⁹ Hollins had served as a trustee of the Duchess's estate until forced to resign by his bankruptcy.⁹

The Hollins house was leased to Mrs. John Astor for the winter of 1913. In the meantime, the nature of the Midtown area had begun to change yet again. The Fifth Avenue mansions and side-street townhouses began to give way to commercial and apartment house development. In 1914, the Hollins house was taken over by the Calumet Club, one of the city's oldest social organizations for men, formerly located at Fifth Avenue and 29th Street.¹⁰ McKim, Mead & White carried out interior alterations to accommodate the club in 1914,¹¹ but more substantial exterior alterations were undertaken in 1924 by J.E.R. Carpenter, also for the club. The original entrance, a Doric-columned porch approached by five steps, was replaced by what is now the central ground-floor window, and a new entrance was made through a new two-story extension to the east.¹² Carpenter (1867-1923) was noted for numerous apartment house designs on Park and Fifth Avenues (his design for 901 Fifth Avenue was awarded the AIA's gold medal).¹³ His extension to the Hollins house was quite sympathetic to the massing and simplicity of the original design, while articulating the new off-center entrance.

Description

The facade of No. 12-14 West 56th Street is an elegantly simple design. The original section is four-and-one-half stories tall and divided into three window bays. The rusticated limestone-faced ground floor has three deeply recessed windows, the slightly wider central one recalling the original entrance. The single panes of glass in the windows are a recent replacement. Above the running-dog and egg-and-dart moldings of the limestone base are three stories faced in brick. At the second floor level are three French windows, each fronted by a low iron balcony and capped by a carved lunette. A string course runs along the lower edges of the lunettes. The double-hung windows at the third and fourth stories are separated by another string course and crowned by splaved lintels. The central window on the third floor at one time also featured an iron balcony. A heavy limestone modillioned cornice with a parapet balustrade conceals the shape of the peaked roof. The small two-story brick-faced extension on the east side of the building, added in 1924 by J.E.R. Carpenter, is set back from the street line behind a one-story adicular entrance framed by fluted Corinthian pilasters.

Conclusion

Harsh economic times forced the Calumet Club, along with many others like it, to disband in 1935 when its mortgage was foreclosed.¹⁴ In the next decade, No. 12-14 West 56th Street housed several commercial establishments, changed hands frequently, and was vacant for some time. During World War II the building was acquired by the Salvation Army to serve as a servicemen's canteen.¹⁵ Since 1947, the building has been occupied by the Argentine consulate.

The Harry Hollins residence remains today as one of the finest of the surviving Midtown Manhattan townhouses. Stanford White's design has been cited recently as "the most quietly elegant and well-proportioned Georgian townhouses

of the period."¹⁶ As such, it is a handsome reminder of the elegant and stylish townhouses which once occupied the side streets off Fifth Avenue in Midtown, and which still in part define its identity.

FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, 25 February 1938.
2. Collins correspondence, Box 251, McKim, Mead & White Archives, New-York Historical Society.
3. Both Low Library and the University Club are designated New York City Landmarks.
4. Leland Roth, Urban Architecture of McKim, Mead & White (Yale University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1973), p.458.
5. A designated New York City Landmark.
6. Roth, p.284.
7. Charles C. Baldwin, Stanford White (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976, reprint of 1931 edition) p.323, cited in Roth, p.458.
8. New York Times, 27 February 1915.
9. Ibid., 4 May 1915.
10. Ibid., 26 May 1914.
11. New York City Buildings Department records. Leland Roth also notes 1903 alterations to the building by McKim, Mead & White, but no such alterations were found in the docket books. Leland Roth, The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White 1870-1920: A Building List, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), p.77.
12. New York City Buildings Department records.
13. Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Deceased, (Los Angeles: Hennessy & Ingham, Inc., 1970), p.109.
14. New York Times, 20 September 1935, p. 22; 29 September 1935, p.1.
15. New York City Buildings Department records.
16. Leland M. Roth, McKim, Mead & White, Architects, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p.216.

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 Hollins Residence has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and culture characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Hollins Residence was designed by Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White, among the nation's most prestigious architects; that it is one of the few townhouses in Midtown Manhattan surviving from the turn of the century when the area was the city's most fashionable residential districts; that its neo-Georgian style facade is among the handsomest of its kind in the city and a distinguished example of the firm's work in this mode; and that the addition designed by J.E.P. Carpenter for the Calumet Club, a later occupant of the house, is harmonious and in keeping with the original design.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Harry B. Hollins Residence, 12-14 West 56th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1271, Lot 47, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Architects: McKim,
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