DESIGNATION DENIED

LALANCE & GROSJEAN

MANUFACTURING COMPANY COMPLEX

HISTORIC DISTRICT

1981

City of New York
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LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING JULY 8, 1980
DESIGNATED FEBRUARY 10, 1981
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
February 10, 1981, Designation List 140  
LP-1178

Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex Historic District,  
Borough of Queens.

Boundaries

The property bounded by a line extending easterly along the southern curb line of Atlantic Avenue, southerly along the western curb line of 93rd Street, westerly along the northern curb line of 95th Avenue, and northerly along the eastern curb line of 89th Street, to the point of beginning.

Testimony at the Public Hearing

On July 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex Historic District (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Twenty-seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. One representative of the owner-occupants of the property, spoke in opposition to designation. Letters and other statements have been received both supporting and opposing this designation.
INTRODUCTION

The Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company complex, a significant element in the Woodhaven community, was the home of an early American manufacturing concern. In the mid-19th century, the Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company established itself as the first manufacturer of agateware, a major form of enameled kitchenware. As an expanding industrial concern, it fostered the growth of Woodhaven, employing a major portion of the local population through the turn of the century.

Woodhaven was originally part of the country village of Rustdorp, which was founded in 1656 by Dutch farmers from the village of Hempstead, Long Island. After the English took over New York in 1664, the area was renamed "Crafford" and some 40 years later with the granting of a land patent from Governor Nicolls, it became known as Jamaica. The area was linked to other Long Island settlements by a highway stretching from South Ferry in Brooklyn Heights to East Hampton at the eastern end of Long Island. Although the Union Course Race Track was opened in Woodhaven in 1821, its rural character remained intact until the introduction of the Brooklyn-Jamaica Rail Road in 1836, followed shortly thereafter by speculative land developers.

The Village of Woodhaven was developed by John R. Pitkin (1794-1874), a Connecticut mercantile tradesman who settled in New York to concentrate on dry goods and real estate ventures. One such venture was the laying out of East New York in 1837 as an unincorporated village in Brooklyn. About the same time Pitkin began to promote the village of "Woodville," named in "honor of an old area resident" according to the map filed by the surveyor Martin G. Johnson in April 1852.1 By the mid-1850s, however, the town had adopted the name of "Woodhaven" since another New York State town had already listed itself as Woodville. During the first two decades after Woodhaven's founding, several businesses and residences were established. Among these were the Pitkin Boot and Shoe Factory, which later moved to East New York and branched out to Albany, and the short-lived John Sharp & Sons chisel factory (c.1853-1855).2 However, it was the Lalance & Grosjean firm which was to provide the major impetus for Woodhaven's development.

The firm of Lalance & Grosjean was founded in New York City in the early 1850s by Charles W. Lalance and Florian Grosjean, for the importation of champagne and household items. Little is known about Charles W. Lalance, other than that he was a founding member of the firm. Although the financier of the joint venture, he is believed to have remained in Europe. Florian Grosjean (1824-1903), a Swiss, gained banking experience in Montbéliard, France, where he met ambitious businessmen, probably Charles Lalance among them. After immigrating to America in 1850, Florian Grosjean established his importation firm on Pearl Street.3

Lalance & Grosjean imported French products, specializing in tinware, sheetmetal, and hardware. The venture met with success and continued to expand to meet increasing demand. As a result Lalance & Grosjean soon determined to begin manufacturing its own products. At a time when most such products were imported from Europe, this was a pioneering step. A pressed metal manufacturing plant was set up on Pearl Street in Manhattan, and numerous French and Swiss-French artisans and mechanics were brought over by the firm to design and produce metalwares. By the late 1850s the
need for factory expansion necessitated relocation. Woodhaven was chosen because it offered sizable tracts of land along a convenient railroad link within close proximity to New York and its shipping points, without the congestion and other expenses of Manhattan.

The original factory at Woodhaven comprised a series of two-and-one-half story wood-frame and brick structures as well as the Sharpe & Sons chisel factory building. The new location allowed Lalance & Grosjean to expand its production operations, and it began to specialize in kitchen and household pressed metal ware. Among the various lines of "japanned" and enameled culinary ware was a gray-mottled type known by the "agateware" trade name. Agateware, made of enamel-coated iron, became nationally recognized and was favored for its durability and quality. The firm incorporated between 1869 and 1870 and offered stock while expanding its production facilities. In addition, the company built many houses in Woodhaven for its employees. Surviving examples may be seen along the south side of 95th Avenue between 85th and 86th Streets. Florien Grosjean himself owned approximately 40 workers' houses while 60 others were owned by the firm.4 A majority of the structures were sold to the workers while others appear to have been rented out for a period of time before being sold off.

The factory complex was virtually destroyed by a sudden fire in February 1876, which was determined to have been started by a vat of horsefat kept hot 24 hours a day for one of the plating processes. As a result, the entire complex was rebuilt with brick and iron fireproof buildings on an expanded scale. Most of the present buildings date from this period with alterations and additions. Lalance & Grosjean prospered and continued to grow over the next three decades, and the village along with it. Of the various metal products produced by the firm, an 1890s catalogue included brass ware, copper ware, retinned ware, japanned ware, blue and white enamel ware, bright iron and steelware, and agateware, made into every type of kitchen and house ware of pressed metal from pots and pans to kitchen sinks. By this time, Woodhaven had a population of some 6,000 people. An 1899 account of the firm notes that "2500 men are employed by this mammoth institution; 2100 at Woodhaven and 400 at Harrisburgh, Pennsylvania." The Harrisburg plant contained rolling mills and tin plate works. The plates were shipped to Woodhaven for stamping and finishing. Up until the late 1930s the press was considered one of the largest stamping presses in the world used in the production of deep-drawn metal forms. The press, manufactured by the Toledo Machine and Tool Co., was assembled on site while the building was constructed three stories high around it along Atlantic Avenue between 90th and 92nd Streets.

Around the time of the disastrous 1876 fire, Henry Loggill Milligan left the firm of Lalance & Grosjean to organize the Newark, N.J. Stamping Co. as the first American enamelware manufacturing concern. In 1886 Milligan's inventiveness led Lalance & Grosjean to pay him $40,000 to keep his inventions off the market. Although Milligan briefly returned to Lalance & Grosjean in the late 1890s, he later proceeded to establish three enamelware companies in Ohio after 1900. These companies became rivals of Lalance & Grosjean and inevitably undercut Lalance & Grosjean's share of the market. After World War I other manufacturers so severely cut into the agateware market that Lalance & Grosjean was compelled to experiment with other lines, notable stainless steel deep-drawn forms as a replacement for
agateware. Joint efforts in research and experimentation with the Allegheny Ludlum Co., the pioneer producers of stainless steel, resulted in the technology of the manufacture of stainless steel culinary wares, and "a year after the first stainless steel ware was put on the market in 1928, the company scrapped a million dollars worth of old machinery and tools and quite making enameled ware."6

Through the Depression years and up to World War II, the stainless steel line was purchased by hospitals, hotels, restaurants, commercial and institutional concerns seeking the newest non-deteriorating product. During World War II Lalance & Grosjean was a major supplier to the U.S. Navy. After the war the firm's culinary items were marketed in department stores under the Crusaderware label. But with new competition and increased imports from other companies, the firm's profits were increasingly undercut. After a stockholders' meeting in June 1955, it was finally decided to shut down the Woodhaven plant after nearly 100 years of operation, and disband the company.

Over the past 25 years, portions of the factory complex have served smaller manufacturing concerns dealing with kniware, window and frame fabrication, storage, plastics production, baking, and a variety of other commercial enterprises. Some portions of the complex have fallen into disuse and others have even been demolished. Nonetheless, the structures remain sound, and a variety of proposals have been put forward for their reuse.
DESCRIPTION

The present factory complex, extending four city blocks along Atlantic Avenue from 89th Street to 93rd Street achieves its imposing character through uniform detail and material and its distinctive massing. Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex represents the core of an important American commercial town development which in turn formed the basis for Woodhaven's existence through the turn of the 20th century. With few exceptions, the structures were built between 1876, after a devastating fire, and 1901 when the company reached its limit of expansion and production.

ATLANTIC AVENUE between 89th Street and 92nd Street.

At the southeastern corner of Atlantic Avenue and 89th Street is a simple one-story white stucco commercial building, dating from the 1950s. Along its main facade on Atlantic Avenue, a central recessed entry is flanked by a series of four metal windows to the west and large signs to the east. Adjacent to it is another one-story white stucco commercial building punctuated by three openings. To the rear of these simple commercial buildings and along the eastern side of 89th Street is an enclosed parking and storage lot surrounded by a simple masonry and chain-link fence. An open accessway, leading to parking and a series of interior block structures, separates these buildings from the main Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Co. building to the east.

The main Lalance & Grosjean building, built after the 1876 fire to house the stamping press, is an impressive brick structure, 65 bays long in five sections and dominating Atlantic Avenue. It features a striking five-story high clock tower at the 92nd Street corner which serves as a visual landmark both for the neighborhood and passing traffic along Atlantic Avenue. At the fourth floor level of the tower are tripartite openings with louvers. A molded brick bandcourse sets off the fifth story with its clock faces. This in turn is surrounded by pressed metal crenellation. The three-story main building has simple rhythmic fenestration with flat-headed double-hung six-over-six windows. Stone lintels and sills subtly contrast with the brick walls. The first floor windows each have the original set of gudgeon shutter pins in place. An austere projecting pressed metal cornice above a dentilled brick course unifies the five sections of this massive structure which is three bays deep on its western end and six bays deep on its eastern end. The rear side of the building is nearly identical to the front except for the introduction of gudgeon shutter pins at all three level as well as the use of star-shaped reinforcement bar collars.

92ND STREET between Atlantic Avenue and 95th Avenue.

The three-story brick structure extending along the western side of 92nd Street is divided into five sections although visually it is one unified building. Its simple facade, which is a continuation of the Atlantic Avenue building, is similar to the facade of that building. However, star-shaped reinforcement rod collars and ground floor loading docks have been added to the 92nd Street facade. All windows in this building originally had six-over-six double-hung sash, and they have re-
tained their gable end shutter pins. At the southwest corner of Atlantic Avenue and 92nd Street is the clock tower located within the six-bay section of this grouping. Sealed-up openings at the second and third floors of the clock tower section once led to bridges crossing over 92nd Street to the three-story brick building on the east side of the street.

This building on the eastern side of 92nd Street, built after 1891 but before 1899,7 was the finishing and wrapping plant. Except for shallow end gables on Atlantic Avenue and 95th Avenue, the building is similar to those across the street with the same brickwork, fenestration, and cornice. The windows have six-over-six double-hung sash except on 95th Avenue where the windows are nine-over-nine. Although recently subject to fire, the building retains its architectural integrity.

93RD STREET between Atlantic Avenue and 95th Avenue.

Running the length of the western side of 93rd Street between Atlantic Avenue and 95th Avenue is the old "annex", built before 1901, composed of three parallel 400-foot long shed buildings. Each is one-and-one-half stories high with the gabled Atlantic Avenue ends each five to seven bays wide. Windows at the second story level indicate the central "monitor" platform office level which runs through the center of each building. Brick bands subtly outline the gable ends along Atlantic Avenue. Two chimney stacks project above the roofs. On 93rd Street, formerly Clinton Place, a series of five overhead garage doors punctuate the eastern side wall of the shed. The three sheds retain the simply detailed brick bandcourse with pressed metal cornice above, which is a common unifying design motif throughout the complex. Peaked roofs, with monitors straddling the ridge poles, rise above the cornices. At 95th Avenue, formerly Chichester Avenue, originally University Place, the three shed buildings have been altered and have had their various openings timmed-up or filled in with ventilating duct grates. Although the three buildings have recently suffered fire damage, they retain their architectural integrity.

95TH AVENUE between 92nd Street and 89th Street.

Along 95th Avenue the main complex extends for three city blocks between 92nd and 89th Streets. Of the five sections along 95th Avenue, the first and second are four and eight bays wide respectively with a uniform three-story height. The window openings of these two sections have simple sills set on small brackets, while the first floor lintels display raised floral relief patterns; the second floor lintels each have paneled keystone and flanking flush impost blocks; and the third floor lintels feature simple pediments. As a continuation of the first two sections, the third and fourth sections, respectively sixteen and twenty-four bays wide and two stories high have similar window details. Except for the introduction of loading docks necessary to service the complex, the sections are all of a uniform character with similar detail. The four building sections are uniformly set above a raised basement level and are crowned at the cornice level by a simple projecting tin molding set above a dentiled brick course. The fifth and final portion of the 95th Avenue group, is a one story high building set above a raised basement; it functions as a loading dock with flanking doors, a front platform, and an exterior metal staircase.
At the northeast corner of 95th Avenue and 89th Street is a large 200 foot by 125 foot rubble-filled lot where a twenty-four-bay-wide, four-story high building stood until recently. Along 89th Street the midblock site is an enclosed parking and storage lot with a tall chain-link fence.

INTERIOR BLOCK STRUCTURES

Within the central core of the main complex between 89th and 92nd Streets, is a series of one-story brick shed buildings. Many are punctuated by elongated windows with segmentally-arched cast-iron lintels. Running along a north-south axis, these shed buildings, once used for tinning, enameling, pickling, and storage, have metal-truss pitched roofs, and are simply detailed with recessed brick bays and simple molded cornices.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Johnson's map shows a Thrall Place, so-named by Pitkin to honor his first wife, Sophia M. Thrall, and his real estate partner, George M. Thrall. The portion of Thrall Place between Atlantic Avenue and University Place was closed as part of an agreement between Pitkin and Grosjean to establish a "dining saloon" and community park on the site. The land was later taken over by the expanding manufacturing complex.

2. The chisel factory building later became part of the Lalance & Grosjean factory complex.

3. Management of the company remained in the Grosjean family through the 1940s. Florian Grosjean had two children. His son Alfred died in 1888 but his daughter Alice Marie married Auguste Julien Cordier in 1884. Auguste Julien Cordier (1854-1906) began his career with the Lalance & Grosjean firm at the age of twelve, working his way up to second vice president in about 1890. Cordier was a member of the Union League Club and the New York Chamber of Commerce. He served as president of the company from 1903 until his death. Cordier's son, A.J. Cordier (1891-1949), a Yale graduate and national squash tennis champion, was president of the firm in the 1940's.

4. Florian Grosjean also owned several tracts of land on Atlantic Avenue adjacent to the factory. He built his large residence on one parcel the size of a city block. The house was later occupied by his daughter and her family.


7. The building site is shown as vacant land on an 1891 atlas; however, the building is described in the 1899 article in the Long Island Farmer.
FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the city.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex Historic District, is directly linked to the development of Woodhaven as a company town; that the company, an early American manufacturing concern within New York City, which introduced agateware to the United States, became the foremost producer of enameled kitchen and household wares in America; that the complex is an imposing entity unified by its massing and detail; that an important element in the complex is the clock tower which dominates the complex and Atlantic Avenue; that the short period of development between 1876 and 1901 gives the complex a cohesive character; and that because of its unified design and distinctive character the complex remains a vital architectural and historical asset to New York City.

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 an Historic District the Lalance & Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex Historic District containing the property bounded by a line extending easterly along the southern curb line of Atlantic Avenue, southerly along the western curb line of 93rd Street, westerly along the northern curb line of 95th Avenue, and northerly along the eastern curb line of 89th Street, to the point of the beginning, borough of Queens.


Jan. 25, 1903, p. 8, (Florian Grosjean, obit.).


Queens Borough Public Library. Historical and Publications Clippings (Woodhaven files).


"Woodhaven's Big Industry." Long Island Farmer, 1899. (Undated clipping, Queensborough Public Library.)
93rd to 98th Streets.

View along Atlantic Avenue, from Company Complex, c. 1903.

Illustration of original wood and masonry buildings destroyed by fire in 1876.

Facade of Grosjean Manufacturing Company Complex, c. 1875.