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1967

MacDOUGAL-SULLIVAN GARDENS HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan

The property bounded by Macdougall Street, the northern property line of 96 Macdougall Street, the eastern property line of 96 Macdougall Street, the northern property line of 188 Sullivan Street, Sullivan Street, the southern property line of 170 Sullivan Street and the southern property line of 74 Macdougall Street.

On March 8, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Historic District (Item No. 49). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There was one speaker in opposition to designation, and two statements were filed in opposition to designation. The president of the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Association representing the twenty-two homes in the proposed Historic District spoke in favor of designation. Seven of the home owners were individually recorded in favor of designation, as were two other persons.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The visitor, seeing this small Historic District, a few blocks south of Washington Square, for the first time, would find that he was transported back to a mid-Nineteenth Century street scene. He would undoubtedly wonder why these continuous rows of once identical houses have survived so little changed, in contrast to nearby blocks. Those blocks are now largely composed of turn-of-the-century tenements but also include a number of small, early Nineteenth Century buildings.

This block owes its very existence today to two factors: the policies of the Low family, which owned it for 125 years, and the farsighted philosophy of a real estate developer in the period after World War I. Both ran counter to the prevailing real estate practices of their times.

The estate of Nicholas Low in 1844 built the rows of three-story and basement houses, in the then fashionable Greek Revival style, on Macdougall and Houston Streets. A similar row was completed on Sullivan Street in 1850. The last of the four block fronts built on Bleecker Street (1860) had four stories and dormered roofs. (It is interesting to note that the use of dormers had gone out of style about 20 years before). An early photograph shows a handsome cast iron balcony outside the first floor full length windows, running the entire length of the row. Sufficient evidence is available from Building Department records of the 1880's to indicate that the original plan probably included shops at the ground floor.

Architecture of the District

A real estate corporation, "Hearth and Home", purchased the entire block in 1920 from the estate of Nicholas Low, Inc. However, only the rows on Sullivan and Macdougall Streets were remodelled. Their architects, Francis Y. Joannes and Maxwell Hyde, wisely retained, on the Macdougall Street side, the original handsome continuous cornice ornamented with modillions and the original well proportioned six over six mantined windows with plain lintels. These houses, taken together, give a strong rhythm and unity to the entire block front.

The stoops were removed, and the basement entrances and former doorways were remodelled in the neo-Federal style, so popular after World War I. The new entrances have six-panelled doors and side lights. The original, paired doorways at the former first floor level were changed to windows and treated in alternating styles. One pair has a simple lintel with cornice; another more elaborate one is surmounted by a large wooden fan-shaped panel framed by a brick arch with keystone and impost blocks. Planter boxes have been placed under these windows, and small iron balconies have been introduced under the windows with simple lintels.

The houses on Sullivan Street were remodelled in a similar neo-Federal style, which was skillfully adapted to the original row. Here again, the original dentilled cornice and windows have been retained, the stoops removed, and the former first floor doorways have been replaced by windows. As the houses here were built singly, rather than paired, the wooden fan-shaped panels have been added to the individual doorways----the detail is similar to that on Macdougall Street. Hyde and Joannes achieved a most practical and handsome solution to their problem of modernization. In the 1920's modernization generally involved

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the removal of stoops; nonetheless, these neo-Federal alterations are in harmony with the original elements of the Greek Revival houses. Carriage houses connected these rows with those on Bleecker and Houston Streets, with the exception of the corner at Sullivan and Bleecker Streets.

Early History of the District

The block which incorporates the houses on Sullivan and Macdougall Streets was purchased by Nicholas Low in 1796, as part of a tract which extended to what is now the west side of the Avenue of the Americas. The history of the land itself goes back to the years of early New Amsterdam. It was part of Wouter Van Twiller's Bouwerie (farm). Van Twiller, Governor of New Netherlands (1633-38), took this land by consent of the Governor and Council in 1633. This action was ratified by his successor, Governor Kieft, in 1638. After the recall of the unpopular Van Twiller to Holland in 1641, Kieft, acting for Van Twiller, began parcelling out the Bouwerie in 1641. The parcel containing the Macdougall-Sullivan block was conveyed on December 15, 1644 to Pieter Santomee, a free negro. Santomee had originally worked for the West India Company and was later freed.

The land passed through several owners until it was acquired by Nicholas Bayard in 1755 as an addition to his "West Farms". (his grandmother was a sister of Peter Stuyvesant.) His son, Nicholas the younger, conveyed it to Daniel Ludlow and Brockholst Livingston in trust for the benefit of creditors. The trustees began conveying it in lot form on February 27, 1790.

Low's 1796 purchase was retained by his heirs for almost 100 years. Nicholas Low (1739-1826) was one of New York's leading merchants and a notable financial figure in the period after the Revolution. He was a director of the Bank of New York, the Branch Bank of the United States, a member of the State Assembly, and a member of the New York State Convention, which ratified the United States Constitution. Upon his death in 1826, he left his estate to his sons, Nicholas and Cornelius.

This neighborhood was undeveloped during the lifetime of the first Nicholas Low. Tusculum, the country seat of Richard Varick, the second Mayor of New York after the Revolution, was on the block bounded on the east by Sullivan Street. The correspondence between Varick and Low regarding the paving of Sullivan Street still exists in the Low papers. However, in the early 1830's, as speculators began to build the rows of mansions on Washington Square, Lafayette Street and St. Mark's Place for wealthy merchants moving uptown, and as the residential neighborhood around the Battery and lower Greenwich Street gave way to expanding commercial use, nearby Bleecker Street was also developed. DePauw Row, which stood on the south side of Bleecker Street between Sullivan and Thompson Streets replaced Tusculum. One of the doorways from this noted row has been moved a block east and is now the doorway at the Bleecker Street Cinema.

As an instance of the fine residential architecture of the neighborhood, Carroll Place between Thompson and West Broadway (now Bleecker Street) was lined with a row of handsome Greek Revival houses on the north side, comparable to those on Washington Square, and on the south side by a fine late Federal Row similar to that on St. Mark's Place. The Lows built 170 Bleecker Street (1835-36) for their sister, Henrietta, who had married Charles King. The association between the two families was a long one, dating back to the late Eighteenth Century. Nicholas Low was the agent for Rufus King's financial affairs, when King was the United States Minister to London.

Charles King, the son of Rufus, was proprietor and editor of the New York American. He was a notable figure in that society recorded in the diaries of Philip Hone and George Templeton Strong. He was not particularly successful financially, and undoubtedly the Low income was of help to him. A few years after his paper merged with the Courier and Enquirer, he retired. The following year 1849, he became the president of Columbia College.

Neither Cornelius Low who died in 1849 nor Nicholas who died in 1859 left any direct heirs, and upon Nicholas' death the name of Low disappeared, but the Low holdings survived. For Nicholas' will provided that the estate be held in trust during the lifetime of his sister, Henrietta Low King, and upon her death the principal go to her children. These heirs, in 1896, fourteen years after Henrietta's death in Paris, conveyed their holdings to a corporation known as "the estate of Nicholas Low Inc."

A part of these holdings consisted of the properties on Sullivan and Macdougall Streets. The Lows, instead of selling the individual houses upon the completion of the rows, which was generally the practice at that time, kept them as income property. In the years following the death of Henrietta, the properties housed many immigrants from Italy who had begun to move into the neighborhood. The estate of Nicholas Low, instead of demolishing these buildings to erect tenements, as did so many other property owners in the neighborhood, let them remain and deteriorate, for they still provided income. It was due to this policy that these structures remain standing today.

A Planning Concept, 1920-1967

In 1920, the estate of Nicholas Low, Inc. sold this section of its properties to a corporation known as "Hearth and Home". William Sloane Coffin, its president, felt that an alternative solution to the "apartment house problem" for the middle class was the renovation of sound old buildings adjacent to downtown areas.

Current practice, then as now, was to build on land on the periphery of the city or to demolish existing structures to provide sites for larger buildings. He felt that the remodelling of some of these charming, existing structures would have a two-fold result: it would conserve neighborhoods whose only future would otherwise be as a semi-slum consisting of rooming and boarding houses, and it would provide attractive, moderately priced housing for "writers, businessmen, artists, actors and musicians." The renovation costs were to be kept minimal by changing the exteriors and interiors as little as possible, while providing new wiring, plumbing and kitchen facilities.

Coffin was the grandson of a founder of W. & J. Sloane & Co. He was a director and later a vice-president of the firm. In 1924, he was elected a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and in 1931 became its president. He combined interest in his business with service to the Museum. Coffin already had experience in redeveloping properties purchased from Trinity Church in what is now the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District. Certainly his philosophy was responsible for the survival of many of those fine houses, as well as the ones included in this District. The Sullivan and Macdougall Streets development was the largest of this type to be undertaken. The interiors of the houses were all designed to include a five-room lower duplex, a four-room apartment on the second floor, and two non-housekeeping apartments on the third floor.

A very important feature of the plan was the use of the open area in the interior of the block. Each house has a small private garden, but the large central area was set aside for common use, parts of which were specifically developed for children's playground areas. The number of residents using the communal garden limited the remodelling of the houses to the Sullivan and Macdougall Street rows. The buildings on Houston and Bleecker Streets included in the original plan were sold.

A New York Times article of January 30, 1921 said that "his development made a real contribution to the solution of the housing problem and is an excellent example of what can be done to other properties in the city, and the rehabilitation of homey old buildings". The Plan of Hearth and Home has become a prototype for many other developments. Turtle Bay Gardens, Bleecker Gardens and Miss Anne Morgan's plan for Sutton Place all involved the rehabilitation of houses around a common garden.

Today, almost fifty years later, the principal ideas laid down by William Sloane Coffin serve as models for urban city housing. The original experiment in city planning on Sullivan and Macdougall Streets has been highly successful. In 1924, the houses were sold to individual owners, who, throughout the years as the MacDougall-Sullivan Gardens Association, have lovingly maintained the integrity of Joannes and Hyde's designs for the fronts of the houses and the beauty of the inner garden concept providing an oasis in the heart of Manhattan.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens 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 two rows of houses, facing on Sullivan and Macdougal Streets and sharing a common garden, are exceptionally noteworthy for the uniformity and attractive quality of their architecture; that the pioneering efforts of William Sloane Coffin, in preserving and making use of these old buildings and his idea of creating communal gardens, were when first initiated revolutionary in concept; and that they were destined to have far-reaching, beneficial effects on the development of our City.

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 an Historic District the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, consisting of the property bounded by Macdougal Street, the northern property line of 96 Macdougal Street, the eastern property line of 96 Macdougal Street, the northern property line of 188 Sullivan Street, Sullivan Street, the southern property line of 170 Sullivan Street and the southern property line of 74 Macdougal Street.