

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY, 53 East 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1916, completed 1917; architect Trowbridge & Livingston.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1491, Lot 25.

On November 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The New York Society Library and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 46). Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission continued the public hearing to December 27, 1966 (Item No. 15). There were no speakers at the second public hearing. Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. In a letter to the Commission, the Chairman of the Trustees of the Library expressed their acceptance of the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The New York Society Library occupies a mansion of exceptional architectural character and distinction. This five-story limestone structure in the Italian Renaissance Style has great dignity. Trowbridge and Livingston, architects for many structures of outstanding merit in New York City, completed this mansion in 1917 for the John S. Rogers family.

The front facade is four stories high and three bays wide, terminating in a rich stone frieze and cornice topped by a balustrade. The face of the fifth floor, set back a few feet behind this balustrade, provides an open terrace, while a tile roof with wide overhang provides partial protection. At the ground floor level, the entrance doorway is interestingly framed by Doric pilasters which support a horizontal lintel surmounted by a balustrade at the second floor level. Each window in this facade has a handsome stone frame. The second floor windows are notably higher and wider than the others and are crowned with pediments carried on carved brackets.

The New York Society Library was started in 1754, more than a hundred years before the New York Public Library was consolidated. A half dozen public-spirited New Yorkers convinced Lieutenant Governor DeLancey to designate a room in City Hall to be used for that purpose. In 1772 the Library received a charter from King George III which still exists among the Library's treasures. The Legislature confirmed this charter in 1789, and the Common Council voted the Society the use of a room in Federal Hall. As the first Continental Congress was then meeting in Federal Hall and as it used the Library, the New York Society Library may in a certain sense be referred to as the first Library of Congress. The names of George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and many others connected with our country's early history were inscribed in the charging ledger for books.

By 1793, the Library had expanded to five thousand volumes and so the Society constructed a building on Nassau Street. They moved to a second location at the corner of Broadway and Leonard Street in 1840, when they combined with the New York Athenaeum, a literary and scientific club of the day. As their collection increased to thirty-five thousand volumes by 1856, it became necessary to build a larger building on University Place. Here they remained for eighty-one years, or until 1937, when they moved to their present quarters.

The mansion the Society now occupies was a residence until 1937 when a generous bequest from the estate of Mrs. Charles C. Goodhue provided funds for the Society to purchase the building. Another large bequest in 1952 put the Library on a sound financial foundation. Modest subscription rates are still maintained for the membership, and the Library is open to public use, although only subscribers may remove books from the premises.

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 New York Society Library 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 NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the New York Society Library occupies a mansion of exceptional character and distinction, that this dignified building in the French Renaissance Style is excellently maintained by a significant organization with a distinguished history and that it has provided a notable library service in this City for more than two hundred years.

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 New York Society Library, 53 East 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1491, Lot 25, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.
