

SCRIBNER BUILDING (United Synagogue of America), 153-157 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1893-94; architect Ernest Flagg.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 850, Lot 4.

On July 13, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Scribner Building (United Synagogue of America) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Beaux-Arts office building served for many years as the corporate home of Charles Scribner's Sons, the noted publishing firm now located in midtown Manhattan. Built in 1893-94, it was designed by the eminent American architect Ernest Flagg. Today it is owned by the United Synagogue of America.

The firm was founded in 1846 as Scribner & Baker. Charles Scribner (1821-1871) was born in New York and graduated from the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1840. He studied law but decided that his weak health made him unsuited for that profession, so joined Isaac Baker in starting a publishing house. The firm's original quarters were at the former building of the Old Brick Church on Park Row and Nassau Street. It soon distinguished itself as a leading publisher of books on theological and philosophical subjects, reflecting Scribner's devout Presbyterian background, but its financial success was assured by such early best sellers as J. T. Headley's Napoleon and his Marshals and Washington and his Generals (both 1847), Nathaniel P. Willis' People I Have Met (1850), and "Ik Marvel's" Reveries of a Bachelor (1850) and Dream Life (1851). Baker died in 1850, and Scribner continued the business alone. In 1857 he purchased Bangs, Merwin & Co., a British book-importing company, and took on Charles Welford as a partner, organizing the firm of Scribner & Welford, importers. He also started a subscriptions department, which published the first American edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1865, he expanded into magazine publishing with the first issue of Hours at Home, later Scribner's Monthly. At the time of his death in Lucerne, Switzerland, the New York Times commented: "As a publisher, Mr. Scribner was noted for the sagacity, accuracy, quickness and soundness of his judgements. The breadth, liberality, and catholicity of his views, as well as the ripeness of his views, were admirably represented by the character and high standing of the publications that he issued....Of Mr. Scribner as a man it is almost impossible to speak in terms that shall not seem exaggerated to all but those who had the privilege of his personal acquaintance."

At Scribner's death, the firms' names were changed to Scribner, Armstrong & Co., publishers; and Scribner, Armstrong & Welford, book importers. Scribner's sons, John Blair and, after his graduation in 1875 from Princeton, Charles Scribner II, began to regain control of the companies from the various partners that their father had admitted over the years. In 1878 the brothers changed the name of the publishing house to Charles Scribner's Sons, which it retains today. In 1881 Scribner's Monthly was sold to the Century Company, and Scribner's agreed to stay out of the magazine business for at least five years. Thus it was not until 1887 that a new periodical, Scribner's Magazine, was launched. Charles Scribner II (1854-1930) distinguished himself as a leader of the movement for copyright laws in the United States and as a founder of the American Publisher's Association; he also helped to organize the Princeton University Press in 1905. Among the many publications issued under his leadership were the American editions of Baedeker's Guides, the Dictionary of American Biography, as well as the work of such distinguished authors as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Brander Matthews, and George Santayana, and British authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, George Meredith, and Rudyard Kipling.

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In 1893 the company decided to move, and it purchased "all that certain parcel of land and premises now known as the Glenham Hotel," at 155 Fifth Avenue. Ernest Flagg, Charles Scribner's brother-in-law, was commissioned to prepare the plans for the new building.

Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) began his architectural career in the 1880s as a designer of apartment buildings, introducing the cooperative apartment and the duplex apartment to New York City. He was sent to Paris by his relative, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, to study at the École des Beaux-Arts from which he graduated in 1889. An early commission on his return from France was for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. As a designer of commercial building, Flagg is best remembered for his work for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. When the Singer Building at Broadway and Liberty Street was completed in 1908, it was the tallest building in New York. A smaller building of 1903-04 by Flagg for the Singer Company at 561-563 Broadway is in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District. In addition to two buildings for Charles Scribner's Sons on Fifth Avenue, Flagg also designed a residence for Charles Scribner at 9 East 66th Street. Although Flagg designed many splendid town houses for members of the New York upper class, he was a notable pioneer in the development of low cost housing for the poor in his designs for both fireproof workingmen's hotels and model tenements. Flagg's own house on Staten Island is a designated New York City Landmark.

By 1913, midtown was turning into the new fashionable commercial district, and Scribner's moved to its new building, also designed by Ernest Flagg, near the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 48th Street. The family, nonetheless, retained the ownership of the downtown building until 1951. It was purchased in 1973 by the United Synagogue of America, a "Union of Conservative Congregations," organized in 1913 to promote a middle path between Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

The facade of the Scribner Building demonstrates the principles of design that Flagg had learned at the École des Beaux-Arts. The ground floor serves as a base for the middle four stories, while the sixth story with mansard roof crowns the composition. Horizontally it is symmetrical about a central axis with a single bay on each side projecting slightly forward to frame the three middle bays.

The ground floor, or base of the composition, is of rusticated limestone and has a wide store front at the center--originally with glass marquee--which was modernized in 1969. Flanking it on either side is a single doorway which is topped by an entablature with cornice supported on brackets. Above each doorway is a small, square window. At the center of the plain frieze, two cherubs hold a garland that formerly enclosed the inscription, "Charles Scribner's Sons."

The middle four stories of the building have a tripartite vertical organization; the lowest of the four, like the base, is of rusticated limestone. The three middle windows are wider than the single windows at each side, and all are triply divided by slender colonnettes. In the next two stories, which are treated as a single unit, the windows have metal colonnettes and are separated vertically by metal balconies. These windows are separated horizontally by broad pilasters and are flanked by half-pilasters. They are set off from the level beneath them by a wide stone bandcourse which is decoratively pierced beneath the windows to form balustrades. The balustrade at the center projects forward slightly and is carried on console brackets with lions' heads, in elegant contrast to the rest of the building which projects forward only at the sides. Each side bay contains a single window at each floor, and those at the third floor are surmounted by entablatures with cornices carried on console brackets, reminiscent of the entrance doorways beneath them. An entablature with pellet-molding frieze crowns this middle portion of the building at the fourth floor. Above this level the tripartite windows are separated by slender stone colonnettes except for the single ones in the end bays; however, they are all treated uniformly being separated by broad pilasters. A bold cornice, carried on closely spaced console brackets separates this fifth story band of windows from the sixth story mansard roof which crowns the structure.

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The sixth story actually begins with a low parapet that bears an inscription above each end bay: MCCCCXLVI at the left end, the date that Scribner & Baker was founded; and the right end, MCCCCXCIII, the date of the erection of the building. These dates are surmounted by curved broken pediments with cartouches filling the breaks. Behind the parapet rises the slate mansard roof. This roof is broken by skylight windows at either side that provide light to the sixth story and at the center by a stone dormer that rises above the parapet to which it is connected on either side by a handsome console. The dormer contains a triply-divided window with stone transom bar and mullions. A pilaster on either side of this window supports the entablature above it which, in turn, is crowned by a broken pediment containing an elaborate cartouche filling the break.

Although the building has a steel frame, Flagg was careful to maintain the illusion of masonry bearing-wall construction by visually lightening the facade as it rises. Therefore, the two bottom stories are rusticated, giving an impression of heaviness. The next two stories seem lighter, not only because of the smooth-faced stone, but also because of the double-height metal-framed windows at the center. The side windows, however, are set in masonry end bays. The fifth story seems even lighter because the windows are treated as a continuous horizontal band for the entire width of the building. The sixth story, except for the large dormer window at the center and the low parapet, has no masonry at all and consists of a high mansard roof. It is through this careful control of mass that Flagg has been able to lend a sense of organic unity to the building, even though the masonry facade does not directly reflect the steel frame of the building. The simplification of ornament anticipates in certain ways developments of the 20th century. The building demonstrates that Flagg had a firm grasp of the basic principles of Beaux-Arts design, an approach that was to characterize his work throughout his career.

Scribner's Magazine, in its December 1894 issue, described its new home. The ground floor was a bookstore. It was intended, however, that it look more like a well-stocked library in an elegant home. The walls were paneled up to the ceiling in quartered oak and covered with glass-shelved bookcases. Large oak tables, holding books, stood around the room, as did book stands and arm-chairs for reading. The floor was made of wood blocks laid in asphalt. All the decoration was Indian red to give a further feeling of richness, and great quantities of sunlight streamed in through the wide glass storefront. From the back of the store there rose a white marble staircase leading up to the second floor where the firm's offices were located. The third floor housed the magazine, and the fourth floor the subscriptions department. The fifth floor was used for storage, while the mailroom and facilities for printing circulars, etc. were kept on the sixth floor.

Although Manhattan's fashionable commercial center moved further uptown, the Scribner Building remains as architectural evidence of a more elegant period in the history of this neighborhood. It is a fine example of the application of the best principles of French Beaux-Arts design to a relatively small commercial building.

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 Scribner Building (United Synagogue of America) 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 Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Scribner Building is a handsome Beaux-Arts office building, that it was designed by the eminent American architect Ernest Flagg, that it is a fine example of the application of the best principles of French Beaux-Arts design to a relatively small commercial building, and that it served for many years as the corporate home of Charles Scribner's Sons, the noted publishing firm.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 Scribner Building (United Synagogue of America), 153-157 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 850, Lot 4, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.