

**504 CANAL STREET HOUSE, 504 Canal Street, Manhattan. Built c. 1841.**

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 39.

On April 21, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 504 Canal Street House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight people, including a representative of Manhattan Community Board 1, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner's representative took no position at the public hearing.<sup>1</sup>

Summary

The red brick building at 504 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill and located close to the Hudson River waterfront. It was built c. 1841 on a site on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich and Washington Streets by Robert Stewart, an heir of the Lispenard family, and its history is closely linked with that of the building at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street. Greek Revival in style with an impressive trabeated granite storefront, the building harmonizes with its Federal style neighbors in its brickwork, window detail, and sloping roof. The building has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. Its presence is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### The Neighborhood<sup>2</sup>

The section of Canal Street on which these surviving early nineteenth-century houses are located forms part of the northern boundary of the neighborhood known since the 1970s as Tribeca (Triangle Below Canal Street).<sup>3</sup> Much of the area was part of a land grant made in 1705 from Queen Anne to Trinity Church. A significant portion of this was leased to Leonard Lispenard as farmland and was commonly known as the Lispenard Meadows.

Trinity Church fostered residential development in the area with the establishment of St. John's Chapel in 1803 and the laying out of Hudson Square (later known as St. John's Park) between Varick, Beach, Hudson, and Laight Streets. The area around the chapel remained relatively isolated until the 1820s when Trinity further encouraged residential development by selling, rather than leasing, lots around the park and chapel. This became one of New York's most fashionable residential districts throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

Greenwich Street, laid out as "First Street" in 1761, became the main thoroughfare along the west side of the island. The City granted water lots which were gradually filled in, thus extending the shoreline into the Hudson River in the early years of the nineteenth century, which led to the establishment of Washington and West Streets, west of Greenwich Street. Canal Street was laid out in 1809, and by 1811 an eight-foot wide trench was completed down the center of the street to carry water from the Collect Pond (approximately today's Lafayette Street and Centre Street) to the Hudson River. By 1819 the trench had been covered to create a sewer, leaving Canal a broad 100-foot wide street. Greenwich Street and the area immediately to the west developed as a mixed-use district with businesses and trades-people who lived close to their work and provided services to the growing residential population to the east. By the 1820s Canal Street for much of its length had become a thriving retail district.<sup>4</sup>

The appeal of the neighborhood surrounding St. John's Chapel as a fashionable residential district was short lived, and the area became increasingly commercial. In 1867, Trinity Church sold the park, and St. John's Freight Terminal was built on the site, contributing to the evolution of the area, as numerous warehouse buildings replaced the low-scale residential and commercial structures. The city's first elevated train line opened along Greenwich Street in 1878 somewhat isolating the blocks to the west. St. John's Chapel itself was torn down in 1918 for the widening of Varick Street. The construction of the

Holland Tunnel in the 1920s and the construction of the exit plaza on the site of St. John's Freight Terminal increased trucking traffic to the neighborhood. Nonetheless, early nineteenth-century structures like those at Canal and Greenwich survived, in part because they remained viable for commercial and residential use, and in part because this block was located northwest of the access points to the Holland Tunnel.

### Greek Revival Buildings<sup>5</sup>

The building at 504 Canal Street and the three neighboring buildings to the east and west are rare surviving structures from the early nineteenth century. The rapid growth of the city in those years led to the subdivision and sale of large plots of land and the construction of groups and rows of brick houses and shops to meet the needs of the population. The buildings adjacent to 504 Canal were designed in the Federal style, characterized by their planar simplicity and brick facades laid in the Flemish bond pattern, which alternated a stretcher and a header in every row. Facades were ornamented with flat or incised lintels of brownstone above the windows. Plain wooden box cornices concealed gutters below steeply pitched roofs. As the buildings had shops on the ground stories, ground-story entrances provided access to residential accommodations at the upper stories.

The Greek Revival style began to appear in residential and commercial architecture in New York City in the 1830s. In some ways an outgrowth of the Federal style, it also introduced new features. First-story shopfronts, which replaced the arcaded bases of the Federal period, were built of New England granite and had a trabeated arrangement, consisting of smooth piers, generally with simple Tuscan capitals, which supported an austere lintel. The larger space between the piers made larger shop windows possible with more prominent displays. At the upper stories, the buildings were faced in brick, laid in common bond, imported from other locations around the Northeast and made by hand-powered brick molding machines responsible for the units' strong red color and perfect lines. Windows were also larger, but still had contrasting stone lintels and sills. Buildings were also taller and often had a visible half story with shallow window openings below a gently pitched roof.

As in the earlier period, owners or lessees of property typically would subdivide a large lot, then hire local carpenters or masons to construct several buildings in a group or row. Then these would be sold or leased. And as in the earlier period, local

builders continued to use pattern books such as Minard Lafever's *Modern Builder's Guide* (published in three editions between 1833 and 1846) to obtain drawings and instructions for exterior and interior plans and details.

#### The Building at 504 Canal Street and its History

The history of the building at 504 Canal Street is closely linked with that at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street. Portions of the Lispenard Meadow, including the area at Canal Street and Greenwich Street, were inherited by Lispenard's daughter Sarah and her husband Alexander L. Stewart. In 1818, the same year that work commenced on covering Canal Street, Stewart deeded an irregularly-shaped lot with a skewed corner at the intersection of Canal and Greenwich to John Y. Smith, and during that year Smith began construction of a double building with major facades on Canal and Greenwich which meet in a distinctive curved corner.<sup>6</sup> In 1829 that building and the adjacent parcel on Canal Street (the site of 504 Canal), which was still vacant and being used as a side yard for the corner building, was transferred to Alonzo Alvord, owner of a hat store on the Bowery.<sup>7</sup> Alexander Stewart reacquired the property in 1836, selling the house [480 Greenwich/502 Canal] but not the vacant parcel [504 Canal] the following year to Florence Riley.<sup>8</sup> In about 1841, Alexander Stewart's heir, Robert Stewart, decided to develop the vacant parcel with a four-story brick building with a prominent granite storefront and residential accommodations on the upper stories. The building first appears in the 1842 tax assessment under the address of 237 Canal Street.<sup>9</sup> (It became known by the address of 504 Canal Street in 1860.) The 1850 census, the first after the completion of the building, indicates occupancy and use. William Kelly, a 26-year old Irish-born collar maker and his 24-year old wife Margaret, lived in the building and ran the collar business in the ground-story store.<sup>10</sup> Living with them were two teen-age apprentices, William Gillian and Patrick Ball. Occupying another residential unit in the building was the family of William Hoffmire, a 50-year old clerk, which included his wife Maria, two adult sons, William, a machinist, and Charles, a silversmith, and six younger children, three daughters and three sons. The third family in the building was that of 30-year old boilermaker James O'Neil, his 21-year old wife Mary, and George Green, a 21-year old trunkmaker, who was probably a boarder.

Stewart's heirs sold the property in 1897 to Samuel Weil who subsequently acquired the adjacent

buildings at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street and 506 Canal Street.<sup>11</sup> Since Weil's ownership, these three properties always have been under the same ownership.

The building has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. Existing records do not specify all the commercial tenants, but based on the evidence of photographs and insurance atlases, they have included a drugstore for many years. The storefront infill has been changed over time, and at some time in the nineteenth century, projecting wood-framed show windows above bulkheads were installed between the granite piers. These were removed sometime in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> A fire escape with decorative wrought-iron railings was installed late in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth century. Otherwise the exterior remains remarkably intact. (A wood framed extension occupies the entire rear yard of the building, as well as a portion of the rear yard at 506 Canal Street.<sup>13</sup> It is not visible from the street.) At some point in the twentieth century, interior fire doors were installed in the wall between this building at 504 Canal Street and the buildings at 502 and 506 Canal Street.<sup>14</sup>

#### Description

This four-story building occupies an eighteen-foot wide lot on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich Street and Washington Street. It is three bays wide with a facade laid up in common brick, which has been painted. The gently sloping pitched roof is covered with rolled asphalt. A tall chimney is placed at the west near the line of the party wall that No. 504 shares with No. 506.

The ground story is dominated by its trabeated, post and lintel, granite storefront, set on a granite base. The granite piers support a continuous lintel with a projecting top molding. Display windows flank a center entrance which leads into the commercial space. All infill is of mid-twentieth century date or later. The upper stories have symmetrically placed window openings with plain brownstone sills and molded lintels. The windows at the fourth story are reduced in height to reflect the lower floor height beneath the pitched roof. None of the window sash is original, but the six-over-six sash at the third story is historically appropriate. A fire escape with decorative wrought-iron railings extends between the second and fourth stories across the two eastern bays.

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*Notes*

1. The Commission had previously held public hearings on this item in 1985 (LP-1443) and in 1989 (LP-1722), but took no action on the proposed designation.
2. The history of the Tribeca neighborhood was compiled from the following sources: Andrew S. Dolkart, *The Texture of Tribeca* (New York: Enterprise Press, 1989); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Tribeca North Historic District Designation Report*, LP-1714 (New York: City of New York, 1992).
3. Tribeca is bounded by Canal Street on the north, Lafayette Street and Broadway on the east, Vesey Street on the south, and the Hudson River on the west.
4. I.N. Phelps Stokes, ed. *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1928), VI, 396-397. See VI, "Index," 591, for more detailed citations on early history of Canal Street.
5. This section has been adapted from Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Stone Street Historic District Designation Report*, LP-1938, report prepared by David Breiner (New York: City of New York, 1996), 7-9.
6. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 128, page 471, recorded July 11, 1818, and Liber 133, page 580, recorded Feb. 15, 1819. New York City [Manhattan], Tax Assessments, 5th Ward. In 1818 Smith's property was assessed at \$1500 for a lot and foundation. In 1819, the assessment was \$3000 for a double house and lot.
7. Liber 254, page 554, recorded Oct. 3, 1829.
8. See Liber 354, page 593, recorded June 10, 1836; Liber 380, page 155, recorded Sept. 15, 1837; Liber 383, page 364, recorded Feb. 2, 1838. Tax Assessments, 5th Ward, 1839-1856.
9. This parcel is not identified by address for tax assessment owner listings prior to 1842, although the lot is shown, identified by the lot number 1453 with the address of 237 Canal Street, on a tax assessment map of the 5th Ward, compiled in 1834. Available in New York City, Municipal Archives.
10. Kelly is listed at 237 Canal, in "collars," in the 1851 New York City Directory.
11. Section 1, Liber 52, pages 368 and 368, recorded June 3, 1897, for lot 39 (506 Canal); Section 1, Liber 173, page 312, recorded July 25, 1907, for lot 38 (506 Canal); Section 1, Liber 186, page 331, recorded Jan. 11, 1909.
12. As seen in photographs taken in 1927, 1929, and 1931 by P.L. Sperr in the collection of the New York Public Library. See *Photographic Views of New York City* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1981), Fiche 0765, A4,A5,A6. It is also shown in Department of Finance Tax Photos, Manhattan for Block 595, Lot 38 (1939/40). A photograph taken by Alan Burnham in 1953, in the research files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, show these show windows in place. They had been removed by the time John Barrington Bayley photographed the building in 1965. See research file for the 504 Canal Street House.
13. See Robert G. Josephs, "A Discussion of the Canal Street House and the Period of Federal Style Architecture in New York City," Landmarks Scholars Program, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1976, unpublished typescript, 24.
14. *Insurance Maps of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan* (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1922, updated 1992), vol. 1N, plate 63.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 504 Canal Street House has a special character, and 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 red brick building at 504 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill and located close to the Hudson River waterfront; that it was built c. 1841 by Robert Stewart, an heir of the Lispenard family, and its history is closely linked with that of the building at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street; that it is designed in the Greek Revival style with an impressive trabeated granite storefront; that the building harmonizes with its Federal style neighbors in its brickwork, window detail, and sloping roof; and that the presence of 504 Canal Street is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 504 Canal Street House, 504 Canal Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 39, as its Landmark Site.



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan  
Photo: John Barrington Bayley, 1965



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan



480 Greenwich Street (aka 502 Canal Street), 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan  
Photos: Carl Forster



504 Canal Street House, Manhattan  
Photo: David Bishop, 1975



504 Canal Street House, Manhattan  
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



504 Canal Street House, Manhattan  
Storefront details  
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998

