

ST. NICHOLAS HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan.

The property bounded by the western property line of 250 West 138th Street, the rear lot lines of 250 through 202 West 138th Street, part of the eastern property line of 202 West 138th Street, the southern property line of 2350 Seventh Avenue, 2350 through 2390 Seventh Avenue, the northern property line of 2390 Seventh Avenue, the rear lot lines of 203 through 265 West 139th Street, the northern property line of 2610-2618 Eighth Avenue, 2610-2618 through 2590 Eighth Avenue, West 138th Street to the western property line of 250 West 138th Street.

On July 12, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the St. Nicholas Historic District (Item No. 25). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation of the Historic District including representatives of the local Block Associations. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The St. Nicholas Historic District, consisting of four rows of houses built by David H. King, Jr., appears much the same as it did when it was built, more than 70 years ago, in 1891. Both then and now, it has been a source of pride not only to its own residents, but to all the people living in its vicinity.

These houses are a fine example of Nineteenth Century urban design, influenced by English antecedents. The sense of forethought and consideration in land development seen here is much sought after today, and often today's results are not as successful. A high degree of architectural continuity is maintained, while taking into consideration even such problems as house service. This problem is successfully resolved by the use of a main cross alley extending through the block, from avenue to avenue, with two shorter transverse alleys between the streets.

The District, designed by three of the most prominent architectural firms of the day, was one of the most prestigious sections of Harlem and is still considered as such. The fact that these houses have been well maintained through the years is most unusual in New York City. Obviously its reputation as a fashionable area has contributed to the residents' desire to preserve their homes and to their tremendous sense of pride in them.

Harlem Background

In 1658 Peter Stuyvesant named this area we now know as Harlem, Nieuw Haarlem. Up to the middle of the Nineteenth Century this part of Manhattan remained very much the same as it had been in the Seventeenth Century. Farms, and some large estates, comprise most of the land holdings. Many of the most prominent colonial families: the Delanceys, Beekmans, Bleeckers, Rikers, Coldens and Hamiltons had estates in Harlem. The St. Nicholas Historic District lies within the estate of Cadwallader D. Colden, an early Mayor of New York, whose grandfather was a colonial governor.

In Lloyd Morris' book "Incredible New York" there is an illustration of Commodore Vanderbilt racing horses on Harlem Lane (now Eighth Avenue) near 137th Street. The Harlem Lane of that day extended up to 168th Street. Morris also notes that when General Grant visited the City at the end of the Civil War, one of his first requests was to be taken out to Harlem Lane.

In 1831 the Harlem Railroad was chartered, and by 1837 it was extended to Harlem changing it from a rural to a suburban community -- one of New York's first suburbs. By 1881, the elevated rapid transit lines extended up to 129th Street, and by 1884 to 145th Street. Thus, Harlem had become a very desirable and fashionable neighborhood by the 'eighties.

During the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, with ^{the} rise of Harlem as a "convenient" residential suburb, there was great land speculation and a construction fever such as had rarely been seen in New York. It was in this climate of speculative activity that the D. H. King houses were built.

Early History

The property was purchased by D. H. King, Jr. from W. A. Watts, who had originally bought it from Mayor Colden, and in 1891 King commissioned the architectural firms of Bruce Price and Clarence S. Luce, James Brown Lord, and McKim,

Mead and White to design four rows of houses. King was a member of the Knickerbocker Trust and was a well-known builder (Times Building, 1889; Madison Square Garden, 1890; Equitable Building, 1872; base of the Statue of Liberty, 1886).

A period of Victorian gentility had led to the creation of the houses which comprise the District. They represented what was possibly the apex of that disastrous spurt of over-investing which occurred at the end of the Nineteenth Century. It is reported that in a society whose working class families paid an average of \$10-18 monthly for rent, rents for these dwellings started at just below \$80 and ranged somewhere between \$900 and \$1700 a year.

King wished to erect high-quality housing for well-to-do buyers, who wished to make a sound, profitable investment. Almost prophetic of the principles of today's Landmarks Preservation Commission, he wanted to be able to assure a purchaser that no nuisances could spring up near these buildings and that one need have no fear of a stable, factory, tenement or over-shadowing hotel rising beside his home. "The interests of each property owner are carefully protected by stipulations against the building of additions or altering any house..." (see agreement of December, 1890, Liber 463, par. 2338 in Hall of Records, between King and Board of Health).

Recent History

The building fever that had overtaken Harlem investors came to an abrupt end with the panic of 1904. A wave of selling followed, and owners sold buildings at losses ranging from one-third to two-thirds of their original cost. Many of these buildings had never been inhabited.

Negro realtors, such as Philip A. Payton and John M. Royall, persuaded many property owners to sell or rent their houses to Negroes who wished to move to Harlem. The northward movement of Negro families from the South and immigration from the West Indies were the catalysts which caused the move to uptown Manhattan. The houses and apartments were by far the best available to Negro families at that time. It is stated in Gilbert Osofsky's "Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto" that Harlem's "name was a symbol of elegance and distinction... its streets and avenues were broad, well-paved, clean and tree-lined...its homes were spacious, with the best of modern facilities..."

Finally, by 1919, the D. H. King houses were made available to Negroes and were already being acquired by well established professionals, a few of whom are still living there today. Many of Harlem's most prominent doctors have lived there. L. T. Wright, Surgical Director of Harlem Hospital from 1938-52, lived at 218 West 139th Street. He was an eminent brain surgeon, and was the only Negro member of the American College of Surgeons at one time. P. M. Murray, of 200 West 138th Street, was the Dean and Professor of Surgery at Howard University (1917-1918) and was one of the first Negroes to be appointed to the staff of a private hospital. Paul Collins, also of 200 West 138th Street, was a staff member in the Eye Clinic of Harlem Hospital.

In February, 1920, a front page article in the "New York Age" described the move to 260 West 139th Street of William Pickens, a former Dean and Vice-President of Morgan College, Baltimore, Maryland, and an Associate Field Secretary of the NAACP.

Several famous entertainers have also lived in the St. Nicholas Historic District. W. C. Handy, internationally known and considered the father of popular jazz, lived at 232 West 139th Street. Hubie Blake, the musician, lived at 236 West 138th Street. Flourney Miller, of 200 West 139th Street, and Noble Sissle, of 264 West 139th Street, were members of the "Shuffle Along Company", extremely successful, which played to a wide range of audiences.

In 1933, Abram Hill, one of the collaborators on the play, "Anna Lucasta", and a founder of the American Negro Theatre, wrote a play about the Historic District, called "On Striver's Row". Popular use of the name "Striver's Row" developed in the 1920's and 30's and indicated the great desirability of living in this two-block area.

Comments on the District

Montgomery Schuyler, in the "Architectural Record" of April-June 1899, praised the King project for "the employment of three architects of the first rank to compete with each other, not on paper, but in actual brick and mortar... in the most extensive building operation that has been carried out on the West Side." His only criticism was that "they have supplied but a small fraction of the demand that exists for such dwellings."

Henry Hope Reed, Jr., of the Municipal Art Society, testified at the July 12, 1966 hearing of the Landmarks Preservation Commission that "By working in one

style, by respecting each others conventions, by keeping to a uniform cornice line, the architects achieved an unusual unity rarely seen in this City. For this reason the...rows which make up this Historic District are probably the finest of their kind in any of the five boroughs."

And the Rev. John J. Hicks, pastor of St. Mark's Methodist Church and chairman of the West 139th Street Block Association, testified, "This area should be preserved in our City because it will aid us in keeping capable citizens and adequate indigenous leadership within the community. The present weakness in the inner city is that we have flights to the hinterlands that siphon off respectable and capable citizens and leave the community bereft of neighborhood leadership and respect."

ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE

The D. H. King Houses, though the rows vary in design and detail, were planned in order to create a unified, distinct "neighborhood within a neighborhood." The use of uniform block fronts of equal heights provides a strong cohesive element, while individuality of approach prevents the area from succumbing to monotony. The basic simplicity and elegance of the houses supports this dominating sense of quiet refinement.

The unobstructed view of the buildings of New York's City College, high on the heights overlooking St. Nicholas Park, contributes to a feeling of openness surrounding the St. Nicholas Historic District. Builder D. H. King wanted the residents of his houses to benefit from their location on land which was "high, healthful and accessible, swept by the westerly breezes from the Hudson."

The planning of ornamental, wrought-iron gateways for access is likened by Montgomery Schuyler to the cutting of the Gordian Knot of house service. The gateways (two per street, and one each at the avenue ends of the block) were at once decorative and functional. Ostensibly designed to act as entrances to serve the houses at the rear, they also led to attractive hidden accessways for private use by the residents. Circular flower beds and fountains were planned for the intersections of these interior "cross-streets". Agreements were made between King and the various buyers concerning the privileges of ownership and use of these "streets" at the rear.

The comprehensiveness of King's undertaking involved more than an interest in the saleability of his properties. The very scale of the project and the resources available to him, the financing and retaining the services of three well-known architectural firms permitted King to concern himself, to a great degree, with the everyday needs of residents within the area as a whole. The air of exclusiveness that resulted is still highly valued today.

Rows in the District

South Side of 138th Street

The houses designed by James Brown Lord, on the south side of West 138th Street, are without pretension and are relatively modest in design and detail. They derive from the Georgian tradition and are constructed of red brick with brownstone trim, in exceedingly good taste.

This row is composed of twenty-five houses, and is broken into three major groups, separated by two handsome wrought-iron gateways. Being the shortest block-front of the four, it stops east of Eighth Avenue at 250 West 138th Street. Lord also designed, at the east end, the four adjoining row houses facing Seventh Avenue. Lord's three-story houses, with basement, are the widest houses in the Historic District--most of them measure approximately twenty-two feet in width. The entrances to adjoining houses are adjacent to each other. Of interest, is the use of a common stoop, serving both entrances, with beautiful wrought-iron railings. The illusion of a single, wider more elegant house facade is thus created, in lieu of the compartmented effect of narrow houses side by side.

There is a restrained use of detail within the row. This row house concept evinces an over-all concern with the unity of the facade, which is treated as a single mass, and the uniformity of the detail serves to create a pleasing rhythm, carrying the eye along the street and maintaining visual interest. The James Brown Lord row is reminiscent of the Eighteenth Century English development of the palace facade and in its comprehensiveness reminds us of John Woods' work in the City of Bath, England.

Lord's basic design includes a smooth brownstone (ashlar) basement meeting the height of the stoop. The window and door enframements are of brownstone with

a stepped splayed lintel and dominating keystone. These bold patterns create a pleasant repetition of forms and provide a handsome contrast to the red brick walls. An unexpected and charming use of an egg and dart moulding surrounding the entrance door frame lends a touch of urban elegance. The third floor level of the facade is separated from the lower floors by an extremely simple, horizontal string course at sill level. Below the cornice, an interlaced pattern is placed above each tier of windows in the fascia thus signaling them. The whole is topped by a slightly overhanging dentilled cornice.

There is an even flow and rhythm in this row. The symmetry that Lord has created, with such seeming ease, does not unduly impose itself on the viewer. The solidity of the massing of the groups, displaying one or two "quiet" decorative surprises, makes this simple row almost startling in contrast with the houses across the street.

North Side of 138th Street & South Side of 139th Street

The block located between West 138th Street and West 139th Street and Seventh and Eighth Avenues was the work of architects Bruce Price and Clarence S. Luce. This block was designed in the Georgian style of the Eclectic period. Here, there is a greater reliance on detail than in the Lord houses, and the profusion of decorative elements, and their numerous variations, are most attractive. The use of buff colored brick with Indiana limestone detail acts as a contrast both to the Lord houses to the south, and to the McKim, Mead and White houses to the north.

This complete block of houses, executed in a uniform style of architecture, consists of thirty-five houses along each street. On Eighth Avenue, two apartment houses close the end with entrances on the cross streets. On Seventh Avenue, there are two groups of five story houses on either side of the inner accessway. The houses on these two block fronts are narrower than those at the south side of 138th Street, averaging about seventeen feet in width, except for the end houses, which are twenty feet wide.

Although the stoops are adjacent to each other, serving the adjoining houses, one senses here that they are distinct, as they run up straight from the street, separated by handrails. The basic street elevation consists of a flush masonry basement, whose entrance is under the front stoop of each house, and three stories of handsome buff colored brick, undefined by any horizontal string course. Instead, the uniformity of the brick work provides a uniform ground to set off the decorative motifs. The window sizes vary, and there are several different window treatments.

The first story windows and the narrow ones at the second story have terra cotta splayed lintels with elongated keystones. The wider second story window has a cornice-like lintel above with a semi-circular panel above that. The two third story windows are narrow and have simple lintels with keystones.

The second story of the houses on either side of the handsome iron gateways display an interesting pseudo-Palladian window treatment in terra cotta. Here, a triply divided window is separated by handsome Ionic columns supporting, above its garlanded horizontal lintel, an arch-form above the columns. This arch has alternate voussoirs elongated with a blind tympanum with wreath design within. The triple square-headed windows on the floor above these complement the arched windows at the second story.

An element of movement is added to the row by projecting forward some of the facades of the houses, which are adjacent to each other. This difference in alignment also adds interest and apparent depth to the row. The doorway is slightly recessed and its round arched head has an elongated, console-like keystone; the arch springs from Greek-fret motif impost blocks similar to those used for some of the third story windows. Delicate wrought-iron balconies extend from the base of the full-length first story windows, and similar wrought-iron work is to be found at the top platforms of the stoops and used as handrails for the steps.

A delicate garland pattern is employed in the fascia of the cornice, signaling the windows below it. A horizontal moulding at the base of the fascia displays a tiny, continuous swag-motif. These decorative elements unify the individual, attached buildings, as does the overhanging cornice surmounted by a handsome stone balustrade topping the whole. Distinctive stone quoins delineate the corners of the houses where breaks in the wall occur.

The diversity of window treatment and the decorative motifs of the cornice create an interesting variation against the over-all pattern of windows and doors. The organization of architectural elements in the Price houses prevents the ornate, almost rococo quality of the detail from getting out of hand. It is this very

richness of embellishment which causes the houses to catch our attention and makes us note their exceptional qualities.

North Side of 139th Street

Finally, there are the houses designed by McKim, Mead and White, situated on the north side of West 139th Street. They represent basically the Italian Renaissance style, which this firm was among the first to absorb, modify, and then transform into that distinctive product of American architecture which we so readily associate with them.

Thirty-two houses, approximately nineteen feet wide, contrast well with the other houses by their generally darker tone. They are built of handsome dark brown mottled brick. The over-all design of this exceptionally handsome row of houses reminds one of a Sixteenth Century Italian palace. The center house of the block, 233 West 139th Street, acts as a central feature of the row. Its elegant first floor English Basement, entered at ground floor, is deeply rusticated and is similar to that of all the houses in this row, except that in place of the simple rectangular doorway of the other houses, there is an attractive arcade effect, seen through two rectangular openings on either side of a round arched doorway. A deeply recessed porch lies behind this arcade, with the doorway set to one side. On Eighth Avenue there is an apartment house, and there are five row houses on Seventh Avenue. The ground floors of the buildings on the avenues have been extensively altered to serve as store fronts. Most of the residences on the north side of 139th Street have a single platform step, with simple railings leading to the entrance doors.

The window arrangement of these houses is very unusual. The first story, in each case, is handsomely rusticated, with simple elongated keystones over each of the two windows and the door, which is set off unsymmetrically to one side. The rest of the facade is of brick, separated by a delicate string course at the third floor sill level. The second story displays two, narrow side windows on either side of a large central window, from which an iron railed balcony extends, supported by stone brackets (consoles). Above this central window is a medallion with a floral rosette. The medallion acts as a focal point for this window grouping and punctuates the row of houses at regular intervals. The medallion was widely used in Italian Renaissance architecture; an early example was to be found on Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital, in Florence, (1445 A.D.). The upper portion of the front elevation contains the third and fourth stories exhibiting an unusual wide-eyed appearance with the two windows at each floor set well apart. The fourth story windows have simple lintels with keystones. The frames of the other windows above the basement are surmounted by small-scale, distinct cornices.

The four houses on either side of the gateways (Nos. 217, 219, 247 and 249 West 139th Street) vary the second story window treatment. Here a round-arched pediment is used, instead of the usual medallion, producing a handsome note of emphasis on these terminal houses. An attractive cornice with modillions crowns the row of houses and unifies the whole composition. The variation in window treatment lends interest and to some extent signalizes the individual units, while brick quoins on the end buildings emphasize the corners and the breaks in the main wall.

There is a great sense of unity and cohesion in this handsome row of houses, yet each dwelling retains a character of its own. Decorative motifs are seen and appreciated as separate entities, and they stand on their own merits. Yet every part is in its place, and the whole is merged into a perfection of whose meticulousness we are almost unaware.

The St. Nicholas Historic District is a striking example of overall city planning at its best, exemplifying, in its three architectural building types, some of the outstanding work of three noted architectural firms.

In this connection, the words of the noted architectural critic, Montgomery Schuyler, though written in 1899, ring true today. He said, referring to these notable houses: "The experiment is so successful that one would like to have it again and again repeated, not merely for the sake of having something entertaining to look at...but as a friend of humanity. Indeed it is so successful that one wishes for a benevolent ædile, who should ordain that all the houses of a block front must make up one design and come from one designer."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 St. Nicholas 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 St. Nicholas Historic District lies within the estate of the former Mayor Cadwallader D. Colden, whose grandfather was a colonial governor, that it is an outstanding example of Nineteenth Century urban design, that these four distinguished rows of houses were designed by three prominent architectural firms, commissioned by a single builder, D. H. King, that this row-house concept in planning created a strong cohesive element within the area, while the individuality of approach prevented the area from succumbing to monotony, and that the basic simplicity and elegance of the houses support the dominating sense of quiet refinement in this handsome and unique area.

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 St. Nicholas Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, consisting of the property bounded by the western property line of 250 West 138th Street, the rear lot lines of 250 through 202 West 138th Street, part of the eastern property line of 202 West 138th Street, the southern property line of 2350 Seventh Avenue, 2350 through 2390 Seventh Avenue, the northern property line of 2390 Seventh Avenue, the rear lot lines of 203 through 265 West 139th Street, the northern property line of 2610-18 Eighth Avenue, 2610-18 through 2590 Eighth Avenue, West 138th Street to the western property line of 250 West 138th Street.