Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0059

18 FULTON STREET BUILDING, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1811, completed 1812 for Peter Schermerhorn, architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 74, Lot 15 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 19, 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 18 Fulton Street Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 31). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Schermerhorn Row, one of the first commercial rows in New York City consists of a group of twelve red brick warehouses all erected at the same time, in 1811-1812, by the same owner, Peter Schermerhorn. These structures with their high pitched roofs form a unique architectural entity, reflecting the mercantile expansion of New York City, dating back to the era when New York Harbor was a port of sailing ships and they were used as warehouses and stores for the many varied cargoes that came and went through the busy port. Spared by the fire of 1835, and over one hundred and fifty years old, this business block is the only remaining complex of commercial buildings in the Federal Style of architecture still standing in New York City.

The row, standing on the south side of Fulton Street, constitutes a business block running from Number 2 at South Street to Number 18 at Front Street. All except number 2, with top floor and mansard roof additions and number 12, with an added story, retain their original four stories and pitched roofs. The windows have splayed lintels and the walls are of Flemish bond brickwork. Some of these buildings have dormer windows which were added at a later date. Around the corners 195 Front Street and Numbers 91 and 92 South Street complete the group and taken together they present an amazingly homogenous street front of early Nineteenth Century buildings.

The Schermerhorns owned property, in the seventeen-twenties, on what is now Pearl Street, between Beekman and Fulton Streets, and they built a wharf at the existing waterfront on this property. At a later date they acquired property on the south side of Fulton Street (then Beekman Slip) and built a warehouse and wharf. It is on this property, and the adjacent water lot, filled-in to South Street, that Schermerhorn Row now stands. An area of six blocks, bounded by John Street, Water Street and Peck Slip, including the site upon which the Schermerhorn Row is located, and of which this building forms a part, has all been carefully studied.

This study reveals that this area is filled land and was developed as a partnership between government and business. The original shoreline was at Pearl Street, then known as Queen Street, but at the end of the Seventeenth Century the City made water grants from Pearl to Water Street, and this created a new shoreline. The next group of grants from Water to Front Streets, in 1750, carefully spelled out the grantee's responsibilities, such as building the street, and the wharves and his privileges such as the control of the wharves. The last group of water lots, granted in 1804 and laid out according to the "Mangin Plan" of 1803, required the building of South Street within three months. The grantees were usually the owners of the contiguous properties.

Peter Schermerhorn, builder of Schermerhorn Row, was one of a small group of leading New York merchants, a wealthy and prominent citizen. He ran a ship chandler's business at No. 243 Water Street, a building which is still standing. He was appointed by the Common Council to serve in the Montgomery Ward of the City as Sanitary Commissioner, in 1784. He was also Overseer of Pumps and Wells in 1788, and was Election Inspector in 1789.

It is interesting to note that a part of the Schermerhorn Row (No. 2 Fulton Street, and No. 92 South Street) were owned by the Schermerhorn family as late as 1939.

During the days of the Clipper ship and of the packet boat, South Street was lined with shipping offices, warehouses, chandler and junk shops. From Coenties Slip to Roosevelt Street (Alfred E. Smith Houses), South Street was a forest of ships, masts, and spars. The bowsprits of some of the large vessels projected across the dock and almost into the office windows directly opposite. Walt Whitman referred to New York City as "The City of Ships" and South Street, in its day of maritime glory, in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, was known as the "Street of Ships". Schermerhorn Row, consisting of stores and warehouses, was a vital part of this early maritime activity.

Upon examining the City Directory of 1851, we find that Schermerhorn's commercial buildings were occupied by a variety of merchants included among them were a fruit dealer, two grocers, a plumber, a bootmaker, an agricultural implement tradesman, two saloons a willow ware and woodenware merchant and in 1851 No. 91 South Street was a Hotel. Sweet's Restaurant, popular among early ship masters and South Street merchants, now at Number 2 Fulton Street, has occupied a part of this row ever since 1845.

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 18 Fulton Street Building has a 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, 18 Fulton Street is a fine Federal building, representative of the best commercial architecture of the period, that Schermerhorn Row, of which it forms a part, is an admirable example of a row of well-built and well-proportioned commercial buildings, designed initially in the Federal style and retaining original features, that taken together they are unique, and that they represent the last complete row of early Nineteenth Century commercial buildings remaining in New York City.

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 18 Fulton Street Building, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 74, Lot 15 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.