

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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GERTRUDE RHINELANDER WALDO MANSION, 867 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1895-98; architects Kimball & Thompson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1386, Lot 52.

On May 11, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. St. James Church, the owner of the building, has given its approval of the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

At the turn of the century the streets of the upper East Side near Central Park were lined with elegant townhouses and great mansions. 'Chateaux' like the Waldo house were numerous, but today only a very few survive. This elaborate neo-French Renaissance residence, built in 1895-1898, was designed by architects Kimball & Thompson for Mrs. Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo. Located at the corner of Madison Avenue and Seventy-Second Street, it is an exceptionally large and imposing structure, its opulence a reminder of the lavish scale on which many rich and fashionable New Yorkers lived in the late 19th century.

Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo was a member of one of New York's old and established families. She was a descendant of Bernard Rhinelanders who in the 1840s was described as "among the richest of the rich" in the city. At the age of thirty-four, Gertrude married Francis William Waldo. The couple had one son, Rhinelanders Waldo, who served in the Philippine campaign of the Spanish American War, and was later a controversial figure in New York City government--first as Fire Commissioner and then as Police Commissioner under Tammany administrations.

Mrs. Waldo, a leading society matron, may very well have also been a leading society eccentric. She once sued for reimbursement for seventy-seven yards of yellow satin brocade which the A.T. Stewart Department Store had promised to sell for her--twenty years earlier. She was awarded \$893.25, a substantial enough sum, but nothing to compare with the cost of the great mansion she built--and never occupied. Upon completion of the house and throughout the following years, it stood vacant, while the widowed Mrs. Waldo lived directly across the street with her sister, Miss Laura Rhinelanders, at No. 31 East Seventy-Second Street. Precisely why the house was left unoccupied remains a mystery. A legend exists that Mr. Waldo died while the house was under construction, leaving a grief stricken widow for whom living in the new house would have been an unbearable reminder of her loss. In fact, the lamented Francis died in 1876, Mrs. Waldo purchased the property at the corner of Seventy-Second Street in the 1880s and built this house as well as the adjoining townhouse, No. 28 East Seventy-Second Street, in the 1890s. Whatever the reason, for well over a decade, Mrs. Waldo owned a beautiful "white elephant", one which she could admire daily from her windows at No. 31.

In 1911 Mrs. Waldo deeded the house to her sister Laura, but in the following year the Dime Savings Bank of Brooklyn foreclosed on the mortgage. At this time, according to the New York Times, the "artistic house" with its "broken windows and partially broken stonework suggested the appearance of some venerable ruin". The bank, which hoped to use the property for commercial purposes, instituted successful court proceedings against zoning restrictions which had limited use to private dwellings. The house was then sold to the Samuel A. Herzog Construction Company. They in turn sold the house the following year to the Fred T. Ley Company. Renaissance Building, Inc. purchased the house in 1920 and when Olivotti & Company, antique dealers, leased the lower floors, the house was occupied for the first time. Olivotti & Company, whose name still appears on the north facade at the altered first floor, purchased the house in 1928. The mansion again changed hands in the 1960s and in 1971 was bought by the neighboring St. James Episcopal Church. Today the mansion contains several shops at the first floor, Christie's of London, art auctioneers, at the second, and offices of the church on the upper floors.

The Waldo mansion is a fine example of the neo-French Renaissance style, generally associated with Francois I. Based on the 16th century chateaux of the Loire Valley, this style was introduced to New York by the renowned Paris-trained architect, Richard Morris Hunt, who designed the first Fifth Avenue chateau for Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt in 1879. The great vogue for this style, which was used primarily for private residences, led to its adoption by many architects, including Kimball and his partner Thompson, despite the fact that both were closely associated with British architectural currents.

Francis Hatch Kimball (1845-1919), a prominent architect of churches, theaters and office buildings, in his early career managed the Hartford office of the Boston firm, Rogers & Bryant. While in Hartford he acted as supervising architect for the noted British architect William Burges who had been commissioned to design several buildings for Trinity College. In 1879 Kimball formed a partnership with the British-born architect Thomas Wisedell, which continued until the latter's death in 1884. Kimball then practiced alone until 1893 when he and Thompson collaborated on competition drawings for the Manhattan Life Insurance Building, a commission they were awarded. They then formed a partnership and were primarily involved in the designing of tall office buildings. Among the many buildings by Kimball are two New York City designated Landmarks, the Emmanuel Baptist Church and the Montauk Club, both in Brooklyn.

George Kramer Thompson (1859-1935) received his architectural training in the New York office of the English architect, Frederick Clarke Withers, and in the 1880s worked for Kimball & Wisedell. In the years before he established his partnership with Kimball, he had an independent practice, specializing in residential work.

The Waldo mansion, constructed in limestone with red roofs accented by copper dormers, cresting and finials, is four and one half stories in height. The main facade on Madison Avenue is symmetrically designed in a tripartite composition with projecting end bays and a slightly projecting central bay at the second

and third stories which originally emphasized the main entry at the first floor. The first story now has smooth walls punctuated by round-arched doorways and large shop windows. The upper floors display the handsome and elaborate carved ornament which characterizes the neo-French Renaissance style. The projecting end bays have square-headed windows with stone mullions and transom bars flanked by slim pilasters with composite capitals. Panels beneath the windows are ornamented by cartouches surrounded with wreaths and fluttering ribbons. At the second and third floors a series of five deeply recessed round-arched windows set behind very richly carved open-work balustrades suggest galleries somewhat like those of the Chateau de Blois. The windows have scroll keystones, disks in the spandrels, and are framed by slim pilasters, except in the central bay which has smooth columns. Four canopied stone niches which contain statuettes depicting saints appear at the second story between the windows, and cartouche-like ornaments, two with the inscription "A.D. 1895" adorn the walls at the third story flanking the central window. At the fourth story square-headed windows flanked by dwarf columns are set behind a carved balustrade similar in design to that of the second story. These windows are on either side of the high central stone dormer which rises up in front of the steep roof of the house. This ornate dormer is in two tiers with columns flanking the windows. A lunette above the larger window contains foliate ornament surrounding a shield, while the smaller window is flanked and crowned by finials. Two smaller stone dormers rise up in front of the hipped roofs at the end bays of the building and two tall stone chimneys with diamond patterned carving are set between small copper dormers. These dormers and chimneys, reminiscent of those of the Chateau de Chambord, impart a lively and picturesque silhouette to the roofline of the building.

The Seventy-Second Street facade of the mansion is dominated by a broad projecting curved bay at the second and third stories surmounted by a balustrade. Both stories contain triple square-headed windows with stone mullions and transom bars at the center of the bay flanked by similar double windows. Beneath the windows are friezes with richly enframed cartouches at the second story and at the third story square panels flanked by putti issuing from foliage. Canopied niches like those on the main facade flank the windows at the second story. A great two-tiered stone dormer, very similar to the central dormer of the main facade, extends up from the fourth floor into the roof.

Although the Waldo mansion is modeled on French 16th century chateaux, its reduced scale and urban setting result in a characteristically late 19th century American architectural creation. The wealthy and socially prominent of New York considered themselves rivals of European aristocracy. As such, it was only fitting that they live in residences of palatial grandeur. The Waldo mansion is one of the finest of these great residences, an adroit adaptation of French Renaissance architecture to late 19th century American taste.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission recognizes that the Landmark on the property in question is partially used for religious and directly related charitable purposes by St. James Church and that the needs of St. James Church with respect to this building may change in the years ahead, entailing alterations to the existing

structure. By this designation of the Landmark above described and the Landmark Site on which it is located, it is not intended to freeze the structure in its present state or to prevent future appropriate alterations, including exterior alterations, needed to meet changed requirements of use for religious and directly related charitable purposes.

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 Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion 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 Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion is a handsome and elaborate neo-French Renaissance residence, one of the few which survive on the upper East Side of Manhattan, that its opulence is a reminder of the lavish scale on which wealthy New Yorkers lived in the late 19th century, that it has an interesting and unusual history, that it was designed by a prominent New York architectural firm, that it is modeled after 16th century French chateaux, that it is an exceptionally fine adaptation of this style to American urban domestic architecture, and that this handsome building owned today by the St. James Church, is well utilized for commercial and charitable purposes while serving as a reminder of the aspirations of a former generation.

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 Gertrude Rhinelanders Waldo Mansion, 867 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1386, Lot 52, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.