

TOWERS NURSING HOME, 2 West 106th Street, 32 West 106th Street and 455 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan. Original building, 1884-86; additions, 1889-90 and 1925-26; outbuilding, 1886-87; architect Charles Coolidge Haight.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1841, Lot 25.

On July 13, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Towers Nursing Home and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twenty-one witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of designation. A number of letters have been received in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Towers Nursing Home, originally the New York Cancer Hospital, was built in three sections between 1884 and 1890 from plans by the noted New York City architect Charles Coolidge Haight. Prominently located at the wide intersection of Central Park West and West 106th Street, the Towers is a focal point for the surrounding neighborhood, and with its towers crowned by conical roofs, is one of the most distinguished buildings facing Central Park.

The New York Cancer Hospital was founded in 1884 to further the study and treatment of cancer. In 1882 John Jacob Astor had made an offer to the Woman's Hospital to fund a pavilion for the treatment of cancer patients. When this offer was rejected, Astor agreed to finance the first building of the New York Cancer Hospital which was being established at that time through the efforts of John E. Parsons and Elizabeth Hamilton Cullum, a cousin of Astor's wife. Land was acquired on the Upper West Side at the corner of West 106th Street and Central Park West (Eighth Avenue). This area of the city was just beginning to be developed with private dwellings following the opening of the Ninth Avenue elevated railroad in 1879. While the lack of public transportation had formerly made the area fairly inaccessible for residential purposes, it had long been popular with a number of institutions. Among them were the Home for Aged and Infirm Hebrews on West 106th Street between Ninth (Columbus) and Tenth (Amsterdam) Avenues, the Leake and Watt's Orphan Asylum between Morningside and Tenth (Amsterdam) Avenues at West 112th Street, the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum on the site of Columbia University, and the Association Home for Aged and Indigent Females at 104th Street and Tenth (Amsterdam) Avenue.

The cornerstone of the new hospital was laid on May 17, 1884, with Mrs. Cullum and Mr. Parsons presiding. The New York Times noted that "the design of the structure is marked by a simple but dignified treatment, and it will be a conspicuous ornament in the upper part of the city." Although the construction of the hospital was essentially finished in 1886, the opening was delayed a year because of difficulties in establishing proper sewer connections and the necessity of erecting two additional buildings; one a small mortuary building, no longer standing; the other, a boiler-house, laundry, and servant dormitory, still standing at 32 West 106th Street. When the New York Cancer Hospital opened, it was the first hospital in the United States and only the second in the world to be devoted exclusively to cancer patients (the other was the London Cancer Hospital). The death of President Ulysses S. Grant from cancer in 1885 was a factor which helped arouse public interest in the funding of the hospital. It was not until the 1880s that cancer was being seriously studied for the first time, and the New York Cancer Hospital was anxious to establish itself as a proper scientific institution. It promoted the use of surgical techniques for cancer treatment and the belief that this helped save lives. Many of the cancer patients were treated free of charge.

The original building at the corner of 106th Street and Central Park West, known as the Astor Pavilion because it was funded by John Jacob Astor, housed women cancer patients. When it opened in 1887, plans were already underway to build an addition for male cancer patients on the adjoining site at Central Park West and 105th Street. The addition built in 1889-90 was also funded by John Jacob Astor in memory of his wife Charlotte Augusta Astor. A chapel which was added at the same time near the corner of 105th Street and Central Park West was built as a memorial to founder Elizabeth Hamilton Cullum. In 1899 the New York Cancer Hospital became the General Memorial Hospital for the Treatment

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of Cancer and Allied Diseases. An X-ray building constructed in 1925-26 was attached to the 1889-90 addition at the southeast corner of the site. In the 1950s after the hospital ceased operation, the building was converted for use as a nursing home.

Charles Coolidge Haight (1841-1917) was commissioned by the New York Cancer Hospital to design the original building of 1884-86. He also designed the outbuilding at 32 West 106th Street of 1886-87 and the pavilion for male cancer patients and the chapel, both of 1889-90. Haight, a respected New York City architect of the last quarter of the 19th century, studied architecture in the office of Emlym T. Littel following the Civil War. His first important commission was for the School of Mines at Columbia College (1874), then located in midtown Manhattan. Hamilton Hall (1880) and the Columbia College Library (1884) followed. One of Haight's most admired collegiate plans was for the campus of the General Theological Seminary, now in the Chelsea Historic District. Begun in 1883 and largely completed by 1902, the plan incorporated a number of buildings designed in an English collegiate Gothic style by Haight. A series of buildings begun in the 1890s for Yale University are among other examples of Haight's scholastic work. Haight received many commissions from wealthy New Yorkers, including, for example, the residence of H. O. Havemeyer and the Club House of the Down Town Association, still standing. He was also selected by them as architect for their philanthropic ventures and designed a number of hospitals. The New York Cancer Hospital, now the Towers Nursing Home, is one of his few surviving works.

When it was built, the New York Cancer Hospital incorporated a number of unusual design features. Medical theory in the 19th century placed great emphasis on the necessity for generous amounts of light and pure air. This led to the development of circular or octagonal wards which would provide many windows; the absence of corners was thought to prevent air stagnation and the accumulation of dirt. The desire for circular wards led Haight to plan the distinctive towers, over 40 feet in diameter, which give the building its present name.

The circular arrangement with either eleven or thirteen beds in each ward also allowed for better patient supervision, made less work for the nurses, permitted more space between the heads of the beds, and made the wards more cheerful. Haight also designed a sophisticated ventilation and heating system-- "a point of vital importance in a building designed for the treatment of a class of diseases in which purity of air is essential." (Annual Report, 1886-87). In the circular wards fresh air was introduced through openings in the outside walls between the windows, and "foul" air was removed via a ventilation shaft in the center of each tower which ran from the basement to the roof. Even with all doors and windows closed, the air could be completely changed every five minutes.

The rectangular portion of the building contained laboratory facilities, small wards with one to three beds, the parlor, and dining room. Haight placed the operating room on the top floor of the building in order to allow for plenty of light. He also placed the kitchen there to eliminate smoke and cooking odors. Writing in the American Architect and Building News in 1891, A. A. Cox praised the building: "The convenient and compact arrangement of the simple and successful systems of heating, ventilating, and drainage with the well-lighted corridors and staircases, the abundance of sun-light and fresh air with the circular instead of rectangular form of ward, make this building a perfect model of its kind."

The Towers Nursing Home in its prominent corner location is a complex arrangement of masses dominated by its five corner towers. The original building at the northeast corner of the site is four stories high and rectangular in plan with three corner towers. The basement and first floor are faced with rusticated Belleville sandstone while the stories above are of red brick with sandstone trim. On the 106th Street front the main entrance is flanked by two of the towers. It is approached by an impressive balustered double staircase while a balustrade above the entrance doors extends to the towers. The front wall and flanking towers are punctuated by a series of vertical windows set above brick panels and outlined by sandstone trim. Continuous horizontal stringcourses mark the divisions between stories. The fourth story with its mansard and conical tower roofs rises above a continuous dentiled stone cornice. The roofs are pierced by decorative gabled dormers, flanked by colonnettes and decorated with late English Gothic detail.

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The Central Park West front is dominated by an arcaded loggia with balcony above, also flanked by two of the towers. The loggia was designed by the architect to provide patients with fresh air and a pleasant view of the park. A simple arcade at basement level reflects the main arcade at the first floor. The arches are supported on columns with foliate capitals. Foliate medallions adorn the arch spandrels. The wide balcony above is enclosed by a handsome balustrade. The treatment of the wall, towers, and roofs is like that on the 106th Street front; however, the tower walls are also adorned with a series of blind bullseye windows.

The addition of 1889-90 was built at the southwest corner of the original building, close to the property line on West 105th Street. While not identical, it is very similar in overall character and the use of materials to the original building. Two large towers flank a wall pierced by a variety of window openings. The mansard roof has gabled dormers. The sandstone-faced upper story of the towers contains a regular series of openings flanked by pilasters-- an element which differentiates these towers from those of the original building. The chapel, immediately to the south of the original building, forms part of the 1889-90 addition. A long narrow oval-ended structure with semi-conical peaked roof, it contains pointed arch windows outlined by string moldings and flanked by buttresses. At the corner of West 105th Street and Central Park West, attached to the addition, is a simple two-story rectangular brick building built in 1925-26 as an X-ray unit. A glassed-in passageway leads from this building to the original building running in front of the oval end of the chapel.

Of interest on the West 106th Street side of the Towers site is the out-building of 1886-87 at No. 32. Built of red brick with stone trim and two and a half stories high, it harmonizes well with the original building. The dominant feature of the front is the large gabled dormer penetrating the slate-covered peaked roof. Projecting from the side of this building is a full-height semi-circular wing with its own semi-conical roof. While relatively simple in design, it is enhanced by stone window lintels, horizontal string courses, and a dentiled cornice -- features which relate this building to the hospital.

In overall composition the Towers is often compared to 16th-century French chateaux. Although Haight was not attempting to recreate a French chateau to house the New York Cancer Hospital, the desire for circular wards suggested a tower design which, in turn, led Haight to select French Renaissance prototypes. Although the conical roofs pierced by dormers and the large towers resemble those of the chateau of Chambord, an even closer analogy is the chateau of Le Lude on the Loir River in the Loire region. The south front of Le Lude built in 1520-30 has a number of elements which resemble the Central Park West front of the Towers. These include, in addition to the general form of the towers, a ground floor arcade, continuous horizontal string courses on the towers and front wall, conical tower roofs and a mansard roof, all pierced by dormers, the general placement and treatment of the windows, and, most interestingly, circular medallions on the walls of the tower and front. The medallions are recalled by the blind bullseye windows on the towers of the hospital. While Le Lude is decorated with French Renaissance ornament, Haight chose to use ornament of a modified English Gothic style, perhaps, as architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler suggests, to let the viewer know that this building was not the recreation of a chateau but a "modern" 19th-century building.

The Towers Nursing Home is a significant building for a number of reasons. Built as the New York Cancer Hospital, it was the first hospital in this country exclusively for the study and treatment of cancer. It was built with circular wards, also the first in this country, and incorporated a number of technological advances which made the hospital a model of its kind. Not only is it an exceptionally handsome building--a visual asset to the surrounding area, it is also an unusual design; no other hospitals in New York City exist which resemble French chateaux. Designed by the distinguished New York City architect Charles Coolidge Haight, it is one of the few surviving examples of his work.

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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 Towers Nursing Home 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 Towers Nursing Home is an exceptionally handsome building which is a visual asset to the surrounding neighborhood, that it was designed by prominent New York City architect Charles Coolidge Haight in the manner of a French Renaissance chateau, that it is distinguished by the prominent towers which give the building its present name, that when it was built as the New York Cancer Hospital it was the first such institution exclusively for the study and treatment of cancer in the United States, and that it was designed with circular wards and various technological innovations which made the hospital a model of its kind.

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 Towers Nursing Home, 2 West 106th Street, 32 West 106th Street and 455 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1841, Lot 25, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.