

212 EAST 78th STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan, Built 1861-65.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1432, Lot 142,

On January 10, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 212 East 78th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was continued to March 14, 1978 (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This charming house at No. 212 is one of a row of six surviving houses (Nos. 208-218) built between 1861 and 1865 as a speculative venture for several successive developers. As such, they may be seen as representative examples of New York City row house development during the 1860s. The builders, Warren and Ransom Beman and John Buckley, were probably responsible for the design. While the Italianate style had been popular for row house design in New York during the 1850s and 1860s, this row is given particular distinction by the treatment of the elliptically-arched door and window openings, which are very unusual on Italianate-style houses.

The block of East 78th Street between Second and Third Avenues on which this row is located was considered a part of the village of Yorkville at the time of construction. Until 1851 the block was part of the property of the City of New York known as the Common Lands. In 1852 the Third Avenue Railroad opened, making it possible for residents of Yorkville to commute to lower Manhattan.

Although the residential sections of the city had gradually moved northward from the lower tip of the island during the 19th century, the block was still undeveloped in 1861 when Howard A. Martin purchased 200 feet of property fronting the south side of East 78th Street. As a condition of sale, Martin was assessed \$128 for the opening of 78th Street in a judgment handed down by the New York State Supreme Court in 1860. Martin subdivided his property into fifteen lots (Nos. 206-234), each 13 feet 4 inches wide; construction had already begun when William H. Brower, an investment broker, purchased them in 1862. Because each of the fifteen lots was the same width and the same builders were responsible for the construction of all, the fifteen houses in the row were probably identical in appearance even though Brower sold all of the properties to several different owners before construction was completed in 1865. The four-year construction period is long for a row of houses of this type in New York City, but the rate of building was affected by the occurrence of the Civil War during these years. Samuel O. Howe, also an investment broker, purchased the properties at Nos. 210-218 in 1864; after the houses were completed in 1865, he sold this house, No. 212, and No. 216 to Eugene McGrath. McGrath lived in one of the houses for a short time,<sup>1</sup> Late in 1865, McGrath sold No. 212 to Joseph Bissicks who moved in the following year. Bissicks purchased the adjoining house at No. 210 in 1867, and in 1868 Bissicks sold both houses to Adolphus G. Mandel who was in the varnish-selling business. Mandel treated them as an investment and did not live there.

The brick house at No. 212 rises three stories above a basement. Because the house is only 13 feet 4 inches wide, the facade has only two bays. Each has distinctive elliptically-arched openings which are very unusual for an Italianate design. A tall stoop leads to the doorway at the left with original arched transom. Both the doorway and the full-height parlor window have crisply-detailed stone enframements with decorated keystones. The elliptically-arched windows at the second and third stories have similar enframements. Projecting sills resting on corbels accent the window bases. All the window sash are original. Crowning the facade is a handsome cornice with closely-spaced vertical brackets. Original ironwork may be seen lining the stoop. All of these elements work together to create a particularly noteworthy Italianate row house design.

1. Trow's City Directory for 1865-66 lists Eugene McGrath, agent, as living at East 78th Street near Third Avenue.

This house with the other five of the row which survive is a handsome component of the streetscape and a distinctive example of the Italianate style. It continues to be used as a residence.

#### 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 212 East 78th Street House 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 212 East 78th Street House is one of a charming row of six surviving houses; that its elliptically-arched openings make it a distinctive example of the Italianate style; that it, with the other houses in the row, is a handsome component of the streetscape; that it is a representative example of New York City row house development during the 1860s; and that it continues to be used as a residence.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 212 East 78th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1432, Lot 142, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Photo Credit: Philip Harris, Landmarks Preservation Commission

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