

154 EAST 89th STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1886-87; Architect Hubert, Pirsson & Co.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1517, Lot 147.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 154 East 89th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

No. 154 East 89th Street is one of six picturesque houses (Nos. 146-156) remaining from an original group of ten. Designed by the notable architectural firm of Hubert, Pirsson & Co. in the Queen Anne style, the row was built for William Rhinelander in 1886-87. The land upon which the houses stand originally bordered the Harlem Commons and was acquired by the Rhinelander family in 1812. The land and houses remained in their possession well into the 20th century.¹ With the completion of the New York Elevated Railroad along Third Avenue to 129th Street in 1878, the East 80s and 90s, Yorkville, became a prime area for residential development. From the mid to the late 1880s, the side streets in this section of Manhattan became lined with first class rowhouses for the middle class, of which Nos. 146-156 are fine examples.²

Philip Gengembre Hubert (1830-1911) and James W. Pirsson (1833-1888) established their partnership about 1870. Hubert, the son of an architect and engineer, was born in Paris and emigrated to this country in 1849, settling at first in Cincinnati.³ He moved to New York at the end of the Civil War and first became associated with Pirsson in 1867 when he hired Pirsson to design six, single-family residences on the southwest corner of Lexington Avenue and East 43rd Street.⁴ Pirsson was born in New York City on December 15, 1833. His father was a well-known piano-forte manufacturer and musician who helped to found the New York Philharmonic Society. Pirsson received his training from an English architect named Wheeler and was engaged in a very active practice before joining with Hubert in 1870. In that year, the two men are listed as the architects for two third-class tenements erected on East 49th Street between First and Second Avenues under the firm name of Hubert & Pirsson. Their partnership lasted until Pirsson's death in 1888.

The earliest works by the firm were typical single-family rowhouses and tenements. However, in October 1879, Hubert & Pirsson submitted designs for the construction of the Appleby, a French flathouse on the southeast corner of West 58th Street and Seventh Avenue.⁶ It was the firm's designs for this type of building which gained for them their fame and prestige. Some of their most famous apartment houses are the Central Park Apartments or Spanish Flats (now demolished) which had stood on the southeast corner of Seventh Avenue and Central Park South, and the Chelsea (1883) on West 23rd Street, a designated New York City Landmark. The firm incorporated some innovative concepts into their apartment plans such as the "mezzanine plan" or split level apartment, and they provided a greater degree of light and air for their apartments than did most of their contemporaries. Hubert & Pirsson were also actively involved in encouraging the growth of cooperative ownership of apartments.⁷

The Queen Anne style, which characterizes this row, is an American variant of the interpretation of early 18th-century English brick architecture. Specific details associated with this style include Tudor roses, sunflowers, multipaneled wood doors and various classical motifs such as swags and wreaths, which often appear on the sheetmetal roof cornices. The characteristic details of the style were frequently combined with other architectural styles.

Although each house is designed with different architectural details which give the row its delightful picturesqueness, there is an underlying symmetry and a subtle balance of elements which enhances the coherence and harmony of the group. All the houses are built of the same materials, brick with stone and terra-cotta trim; they are all three stories high with imbricated slate mansard roofs pierced by dormers; and, with the exception of No. 146, each house is basically one bay wide. Four of the houses within the row echo one another: Nos. 148 and 154 have arched first floors, two windows in the second and a projecting bay at the third; Nos. 152 and 156 have similar first floors, projecting bays at the second and single bays pierce the third. Since the original plan, which was not carried out, was to erect a row of ten houses, the pairing may have been intended to be more evident.⁸

The ground floor of No. 154 is a dramatic round arch with rough-faced stone voussoirs. It is approached from a low stoop with handsome wrought-iron railings. Recessed behind the arch are the multipaneled double doors similar to the doors on the other houses of the row and a large square-headed window. Both the window and doors are joined within a handsome paneled enframingent. A molded smooth stone band separates the first from the second floor which is pierced by two square headed windows with flat arches and molded key-stones. Just below the tops of windows is a terra-cotta chevron band. At the third floor is a three-sided oriel carried on a decorated corbel and crowned by a simple wrought-iron balcony that protects the pedimented dormer.

FOOTNOTES

1. General Statement of Early Title, Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Block 1517.
2. Carnegie Hill Historic District Designation Report. Landmarks Preservation Commission, July 23, 1974, p. 2.
3. "Philip Gengembre Hubert Obituary," American Art Annual, 10 (1913), 78.
4. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department, Docket Books, N.B. 685-67.
5. "James W. Pirsson Obituary," Building, 8 (3/3/1888), 76.
6. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department, Docket Books, N.B. 963-70.
7. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department, Docket Books, N.B. 769-79.
8. "James W. Pirsson Obituary," The American Architect and Building News. Vol. 23, No. 639, p. 133.
9. New York City Manhattan Buildings Department, Block 1517, Lots 47-49, N.B. 767-86.

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 154 East 89th 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 No. 154 East 89th Street House was designed as part of a row of houses by Hubert, Pirsson & Co., a firm of notable New York City architects; that the house was built for William Rhinelander whose family acquired the land in 1812; that the house was designed in the Queen Anne style and displays a picturesque quality typical of the style; that few such rows of Queen Anne houses survive in the city; that the house is a fine example of the type of row house erected during the initial development of this section of Manhattan; and that this house and the row of which it is an integral part, creates a charming urban streetscape.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 9-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 154 East 89th Street House Borough of Manhattan designates Tax Map Block 1517, Lot 147 Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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154-152 E. 89th Street
Hubert, Pirsson & Co.
1886-87