

ROBBINS & APPLETON BUILDING, 1-5 Bond Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1879-80; architect Stephen Decatur Hatch.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 529, Lot 10 and portions of Shinbone Alley which are located to the west and the south of Lot 10.

On March 13, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Robbins & Appleton Building, 1-5 Bond Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Robbins & Appleton Building at 1-5 Bond Street, an excellent example of cast-iron architecture, was designed by Stephen Decatur Hatch. Built between June 4, 1879, and April 30, 1880, it served as a factory for the manufacture of watchcases for the American Waltham Watch Company founded by Daniel F. Appleton and Henry A. Robbins.¹ This building replaced an earlier cast-iron store, also designed by Hatch and built for Robbins & Appleton in 1871, which was destroyed in a spectacular fire on the night of March 6, 1877.²

Bond Street, opened in 1805,³ had been one of the most fashionable residential streets in the city during the second quarter of the 19th century. Many of New York's prominent families built their elegant Federal and Greek Revival town houses along its tree-shaded length between Broadway and the Bowery. Within the span of a single generation, the quiet dignity of the street began to change, reflecting the transformation taking place in the larger city surrounding it.⁴ By the 1850s, most of Broadway, from the Battery to Union Square, had become commercial in character, and the side streets leading from it were beginning to shift from residential to business uses. Many of the houses on Bond Street became dentists' offices at this time, foretelling what was soon to happen to the street. In January 1860, the New York Times reported that, "...two or three business establishments have already invaded [Bond Street's] precincts," and, "No. 1 is occupied as a restaurant, and a new hardware-store is soon to be opened next to the residence of Dr. Francis."⁵ Dr. Francis sold his house six months later.⁶ Within the next few years, most of his neighbors did the same, migrating to the newer fashionable area--Fifth Avenue. An interesting reminder of the original residential character of the area is Shinbone Alley, opening onto Bond Street next to the Robbins & Appleton Building and running behind the existing buildings through the center of the block. This alley originally provided access to the stables behind the houses on Bleecker and Bond Streets.

In 1869, the sites at 1-5 Bond Street were either purchased or leased by Robbins and Appleton and the land was soon cleared for the erection of their first building. Completed in 1871, it was erected in only three months.⁸ Daniel Fuller Appleton (1826-1904) was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, the son of General James Appleton (1785-1862), an officer during the War of 1812 and a leading prohibitionist and abolitionist.⁹ Daniel Appleton was educated in the public school of Portland, Maine, where the family moved in 1833 and where his father was to serve as a member of the state legislature. After being trained in watchmaking by a brother, he came to New York and began working for Henry A. Robbins, a watch

importer, in 1852.¹⁰ He soon entered into partnership with his employer, thus forming the firm of Robbins & Appleton. In 1857, the firm purchased a small watch manufactory in Waltham, Massachusetts, which was to grow into the American Waltham Watch Company, one of the major manufacturing firms of its type in the country. Appleton was politically and socially active. He served as a member of the first national convention of the Republican Party in 1856; he was President of the New England Society in 1878-79; he held the Vice Presidency of the Union League Club; and he was a member of the Century, the Metropolitan, and the Grolier Clubs and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹¹ Henry Asher Robbins (1829-1914) was born in Connecticut, the son of the Rev. Royal Robbins. He moved to New York about 1850 and entered business with his older brother, an importer of watches.¹² A few years later, he and Appleton formed their company which, by 1880, was producing about \$2,000,000 worth of watch cases from their new Bond Street factory.¹³

Stephen Decatur Hatch, the architect of the Robbins & Appleton Building at 1-5 Bond Street, was born in Swanton, Vermont, in 1839 and settled in New York where he entered the architectural office of John B. Snook. In 1864, after spending four years in Snook's office as a draftsman, he established his own practice, remaining active until his death in 1894. During his thirty-year career, Hatch designed a number of imposing domestic and commercial buildings in a wide variety of styles. Among his most notable buildings are: No. 213-15 Water Street (1868), a handsome Italianate cast-iron warehouse in the South Street Seaport Historic District; the Gilsey House hotel (1869-71), one of the city's most impressive Second Empire cast-iron buildings at 1200 Broadway; the first Robbins & Appleton Building at No. 1-5 Bond Street (1870-71), a Second Empire cast-iron store that burned in 1877; the Dime Savings Bank (1875-77), an imposing three-sided Second Empire structure that stood on the south side of West 32nd Street at the intersection of Broadway and Sixth Avenue; the famous Murray Hill Hotel (1880) that once stood on the southwest corner of East 41st Street and Park Avenue; and two dramatic Romanesque Revival buildings along Broadway, the Manhattan Savings Institution (1889-91) at the northeast corner of Bleecker Street and the Roosevelt Building at 13th Street.¹⁴ The cast-iron buildings, No. 213-15 Water Street, the Gilsey House, and the 1871 and the current 1879 structures at No. 1-5 Bond Street, all indicate the strong influence that the four years spent in Snook's office had upon him.

John B. Snook (1815-1901) was a leading architect with one of the largest practices in the city during the 19th century. It is the firm of Trench & Snook that is attributed with the design of the A.T. Stewart department store, still standing on the east side of Broadway between Chambers and Reade Streets. This building, begun in 1845, was among the most influential buildings erected in New York in the last century. The Stewart store, the first in the United States to be stylistically based on the Italian Renaissance, "created architectural repercussions up and down the Atlantic seaboard."¹⁵

The date in the city's development at which the Stewart store appeared-- 1845--was particularly fortuitous for the future physical appearance New York would assume. The discovery of gold in California in 1849, much of which flowed into the city's banks, the large influx of cheap labor from Ireland and Germany at the end of the decade, and the general growth of the economy, all contributed to an unprecedented expansion of the city and created a new wealthy class of citizens-- the New York merchant prince. No longer satisfied with the chaste classicism of

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The date in the city's development at which the Stewart store appeared-- 1845--was particularly fortuitous for the future physical appearance New York would assume. The discovery of gold in California in 1849, much of which flowed into the city's banks, the large influx of cheap labor from Ireland and Germany at the end of the decade, and the general growth of the economy, all contributed to an unprecedented expansion of the city and created a new wealthy class of citizens-- the New York merchant prince. No longer satisfied with the chaste classicism of

the Greek temple, the new "calico aristocracy" wanted to express their new-found wealth and prestige in monumental architectural terms. The Stewart store, to which they flocked, recalling the palace of a Renaissance mercant prince in 16th-century Italy, ideally suited their desires. Not only did the palazzo stylistically meet the new taste of the time, it also provided practical advantages over the Greek Revival commercial building. By eliminating the characteristic columned portico, the floor area and amount of light reaching the interior was increased. The new style also provided a means for expanding a building without destroying its aesthetic effect. Once the basic design was established, it could be repeated as often as the owner wished or could afford.¹⁶ The history of the expansion of the Stewart store provides proof of this.¹⁷

By the beginning of the 1850s, the palazzo style as the symbol of wealth and aristocracy was fixed in the popular imagination, and Broadway, in particular, metamorphosed from a street of small brick retail shops into a boulevard of marble, brownstone and cast-iron palaces. The use of cast-iron as a facade material and the new style were particularly well suited for each other. To make a cast-iron facade, the designer produced full-sized drawings of the principal parts from which patterns were made. Molds were created in wet sand and pieces cast in these molds. The castings were then cleaned, chipped and filed and the ends of the columns cut smooth. The entire facade would be assembled in the fitting shop, given a coat of oxide of iron paint and the individual members numbered. Finally, the entire facade would be separated and shipped to the building site for reassembly.¹⁸ Once the original drawings and the initial casting were made, the unit could be reproduced at any time in the near or distant future. This standardized construction technique, joined with the palace mode's basic characteristic of repetition of a basic design unit, greatly enhanced the popularity of both the material and the style.

Another reason for the popularity of cast iron as a building material was its fire-resistant quality. James Bogardus, an early manufacturer of cast-iron fronts and one of their great advocates, asserted in his pamphlet: "Cast-iron houses are perfectly fire-proof...for, it is well known, not only a high intense heat, but the use of a blast, is required to reduce iron to a molten state; and never yet, in any conflagration, has it been found melted, except in pieces of minute dimensions, and in such situation that the current of the flames created around them an artificial blast."¹⁹ The burning of the first Robbins & Appleton Building in 1877 gives evidence of the stability of iron structures. As reported in the New York Times, after four hours of intensive burning, the upper three floors of the six-story building collapsed.²⁰ The collapse was not the result of the iron facade melting or failing, but because all interior support had been destroyed. The Assistant Fire Chief at the scene reported that, "The iron front was one of the best he had seen...The interior, however, was a forest of timber. The columns, beams, floors, and stairways inside...were chiefly of Georgia pine, and he compared the structure to a frame building encased with iron."²¹ There was also evidence of shoddy and hazardous construction of the interior²² which may explain why the building took only three months to erect. Even without interior support, the lower three floors of the facade remained standing after the fire, demonstrating the basic stability of the cast-iron facade. Because they tilted precariously over the street, they were ordered pulled down. After much time and energy was spent by scores of men in a futile attempt to accomplish this, a winch-truck--brought to the

site to salvage the safes of the tenants--was needed to pull the lower floors down. Having succeeded in toppling the facade, "...the pavement in Bond-street [was] covered with fragments of fancifully painted and gilded fragments of iron, broken columns and crushed pediments."²³

The burned building was designed by Hatch as an impressive commercial palazzo --a type that reflected his training with Snook. Richly decorated in keeping with its original function, it was used as a store that attracted jewelers and dealers in silverware as its tenants. At the time of the fire in 1877, the tenants, besides Robbins & Appleton, included: Gorham Silver Manufacturing Co.; Carrier, Howkins & Sloane, jewelers; Baldwin, Sexton & Peterson, jewelers; and Taylor, Olmstead & Taylor, dealers in fancy goods, among others.²⁴

The present building, erected two years after the fire, is a stylistic variation on the palace theme. Although designed by the same architect in the same style with the same facade material for the same clients as the 1871 building and retaining such features as the mansard roof, the function of the new building was different. The new building was to serve as a factory with the exception of some floor space which was leased to D. Appleton & Co., the notable book publishing firm.²⁵ Lush and intricate architectural embellishment was unnecessary on a utilitarian structure such as a factory. With the exception of the ground floor, roof, and shallow end pavilions which give the building its Second Empire character--unusual for this date and probably retained at the insistence of the client--the facade consists of a single window bay unit reproduced twelve times across each of the upper four floors in disciplined regularity. The bay unit is a deeply recessed one-over-one double-hung window flanked by smooth columns with simple necking and stylized capitals carrying a shouldered arch. The strength and beauty of the building lie in the strong horizontals of the cornices above each floor and the three-dimensional quality created by the deeply recessed windows.

The major difference between the ground floor and the upper stories, is that the lower part of the ground-floor columns is enhanced by an incised spiralling groove, and there is a handsome entrance portico, similar in design to the window units, crowned with a broken pediment carried on modillions. The impressive mansard, sheathed with imbricated slates, is pierced by Palladian-like dormers in the end towers over the shallow pavilions and by a central, four-bay wide dormer. At the center of this dormer are two round-arch windows with keystones that carry a decorative plaque bolted to the surface. Below the pediment is a decorated bull's-eye that probably once held a clock manufactured by the owners. To either side of the central section are square-headed windows with flanking columns that carry the ends of a pediment. No. 1-5 Bond Street is a handsome commercial palazzo in the French Second Empire mode and is a fine representative of that type of 19th-century structure. It is an excellent example of cast-iron architecture and a commanding presence in the streetscape--a strong reminder of the city's rich architectural heritage.

Report prepared by James T. Dillon
Research Department.

FOOTNOTES

1. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department: New Building Docket Books, NB # 373-1879.
2. New York Times, 3/7/1877.
3. Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831, Analytical Index (New York: The City of New York, 1930). Listing for Bond Street gives a large number of references to the opening, grading, etc., of the street.
4. Charles Lockwood, Bricks and Brownstone (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1972), pp. 40-49; Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown, An Illustrated History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), pp. 49-51, 58, 73, 172.
5. New York Times, 1/19/1860.
6. New York Times, 7/28/1860.
7. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Surrogates Court, Block 529, Lot 10; Liber 1088, Page 649; Liber 1106, Page 423; Liber 1129, Page 598.
8. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department: New Building Docket Books, N.B. #43-1871.
9. Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 327.
10. New York Street Directories, 1852/53.
11. New York Times, 2/6/1904 (Appleton Obituary).
12. New York Street Directories, 1850/51; New York Times, 1/23/1914 (Robbins Obituary).
13. Henry R. Stiles, ed., A History of Kings County including the City of Brooklyn, II (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), p. 776.
14. Architecture and Building, August 18, 1894 (Hatch Obituary).
15. Winston Weisman, "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845-1875", Art Bulletin, 36 (December 1954), 288.
16. Ibid., 289.
17. Mary Ann Smith, "John Snook and the Design for A.T. Stewart's Store", The New York Historical Society Quarterly, LVIII (January 1974), 22-33.
18. SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Designation Report (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1973), p. 17.
19. James Bogardus, "Cast Iron Buildings: Their Construction and Advantages", The Origins of Cast Iron Architecture in America (New York: DaCapo Press, 1970) p. 12. (Reprint of 1856 pamphlet.)

20. New York Times, 3/7/1877.
21. New York Times, 3/8/1877.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. New York Times, 3/7/1877.
25. New York Business Directories, 1872-1885.

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 Robbins & Appleton Building 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 Robbins & Appleton Building is a fine example of the work of Stephen Decatur Hatch, a prominent New York City architect; that it is a handsome commercial palazzo in the French Second Empire mode, and is an excellent representative of that type of 19th-century architecture; that it replaces an 1871 Second Empire building by the same architect for the same clients; that the building retains features of the 1871 building; that among its important features are the mansard roof and the repetitive bay units--a characteristic feature of cast-iron architecture; that it was built for a prominent watch-manufacturing business; that it is a commanding presence in the streetscape; and that it is a strong reminder of the city's rich architectural heritage.

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 Robbins & Appleton Building, 1-5 Bond Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 529, Lot 10 and portions of Shinbone Alley which are located to the west and south of lot 10, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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March 8, 1877, p. 5; March 9, 1877, p. 2; March 12, 1877, p. 4.

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Photo credit: Michael Stein

Robbins & Appleton Building 1879-80
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