

Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 11, 1979, Designation List 127
LP-1040

WOODS MERCANTILE BUILDINGS, 46, 48-50 White Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1865; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 193, Lots 10 and 11.

On March 13, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Woods Mercantile Buildings and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 16). The hearing was continued to May 8, 1979 (Item No. 4). All hearings 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

The Woods Merchantile Buildings at Nos. 46-50 White Street are handsome examples of mid-19th century commercial architecture. Built of marble with a cast-iron ground floor, these two buildings were designed as a single unit in a simplified style based on Renaissance architecture. They were erected in 1865 by Samuel and Abraham Wood as first class storehouses.¹

For fifty years after its opening in 1806, White Street was a quiet middle-class residential street. With the massive waves of emigrants from Germany and Ireland beginning in 1848 and the discovery of gold in California in 1849, much of which flowed into the city's banks, the city underwent a period of rapid growth and northward expansion. The small Federal and Greek Revival private houses that lined the section of Broadway near White Street were rapidly replaced or converted to commercial use. The sidestreets maintained their residential character a few years longer than Broadway, but by the outbreak of the Civil War, they too were redeveloped for commercial purposes.

The Worth Street area of which White Street is a part was, by then, the textile center of the city. During the War, when Britain--the leading manufacturer of dry goods at the time--was cut off from its cotton source in the Southern States, American firms were forced to rely on domestic rather than imported products. This created great expansion of the textile industry throughout the North and the Worth Street area swelled with new wealth. After the War, the section emerged as the country's center of the dry goods trade. New construction totally changed the district from a neighborhood of private two or three-story brick houses to a thriving, congested area of six-story high marble and cast-iron warehouses.

Stylistically, the buildings are based on the architecture of the Renaissance. In 1845, John Snook designed the A.T. Stewart department store, still standing on the east side of Broadway between Chambers and Reade Streets. This was the first building in the United States to be stylistically based on the Italian Renaissance and was among the most influential buildings erected in New York in the last century. With the Stewart building, Snook introduced the palace or palazzo mode for commercial structures and "...created architectural repercussions up and down the Atlantic seaboard."²

The form of the new mode was cubic, flat-roofed and nearly flat-surfaced. It had the practical advantages of providing large window areas, greater natural lighting for interiors and more usable floor space. It also enabled an owner to expand his building without destroying its aesthetic effect. Once the basic design was completed, it could be repeated as often as the owner wished or could afford. As the new form developed, exterior wall surface was reduced to a minimum creating a facade that was essentially a glazed columnar screen. Retail stores wishing to attract the fashionable carriage trade presented their potential customers with elaborate fronts embellished with a wealth of cartouches, capitals, pediments and foliate brackets. Such ornamentation was unnecessary for utilitarian structures like warehouses. These buildings were stripped of most ornament resulting in a simple, straight-forward style. The Woods Mercantile Buildings are fine example of this functional style. An interesting fact about the style of the Woods Mercantile Buildings is that for years after, architects of full cast-iron front warehouses imitated it. Examples of this copying are to be seen on neighboring buildings in White Street, as at No. 60 (1869) or around the corner on Broadway at No. 385 (1875). This illustrates the original intent of most cast-iron buildings, which was to erect quickly and cheaply structures which would appear to be made of stone.

The Woods Buildings are marble, five stories high and ten windows wide with a cast-iron ground floor and pedimented roof. The cast-iron storefront consists of Tuscan columns on polygonal pedestals supporting an unadorned fascia and modillioned cornice. The upper stories consist of a single window bay unit repeated across each floor in disciplined regularity. The bay is a recessed square-headed window with rounded corners and panel at its base. Tuscan columns flank the window and support a depressed arch. The columns have polygonal abaci echoing their polygonal pedestals. Molded bandcourses with end blocks separate each story enhancing the facade's horizontality. Paneled pilasters with recessed diamond forms at their centers terminate each floor. The plane of the building is broken at the third floor by two balconies in front of the third and sixth bays. The handsome dentiled roof entablature has a paneled fascia similar to the panel beneath the windows, and elegant brackets carrying a modillioned cornice. Within the open-bed pediment is a incription "Woods Mercantile Buildings" and the date "1865". The elegant simplicity of its details and its fine expression of the material of which it is built mark the Woods Mercantile Buildings as an excellent representative of the commercial buildings erected in the city following the Civil War.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Surrogates Court, Block 193, Lots 10 & 11, Liber 932, Page 231.
2. Winston Weisman, "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845-1875," Art Bulletin, 36 (December 1954), 288.

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 Woods Mercantile Buildings have 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 Woods Mercantile Buildings were built in 1865 as storehouses for Samuel and Abraham Wood, that the buildings are fine examples of the palazzo mode of architecture which was based on Italian Renaissance prototypes, that the elegant simplicity and restraint of the facades indicate their original utilitarian function; and that they are representatives of a period of the city's history when White Street was part of the country's textile and dry goods center.

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 Woods Mercantile Buildings, 46, 48-50 White Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 193, Lots 10 and 11, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Sites.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Block 193, Lots 10 and 11.

Weisman, Winston. "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845-1875."
Art Bulletin, 36 (December 1954), 285-302.

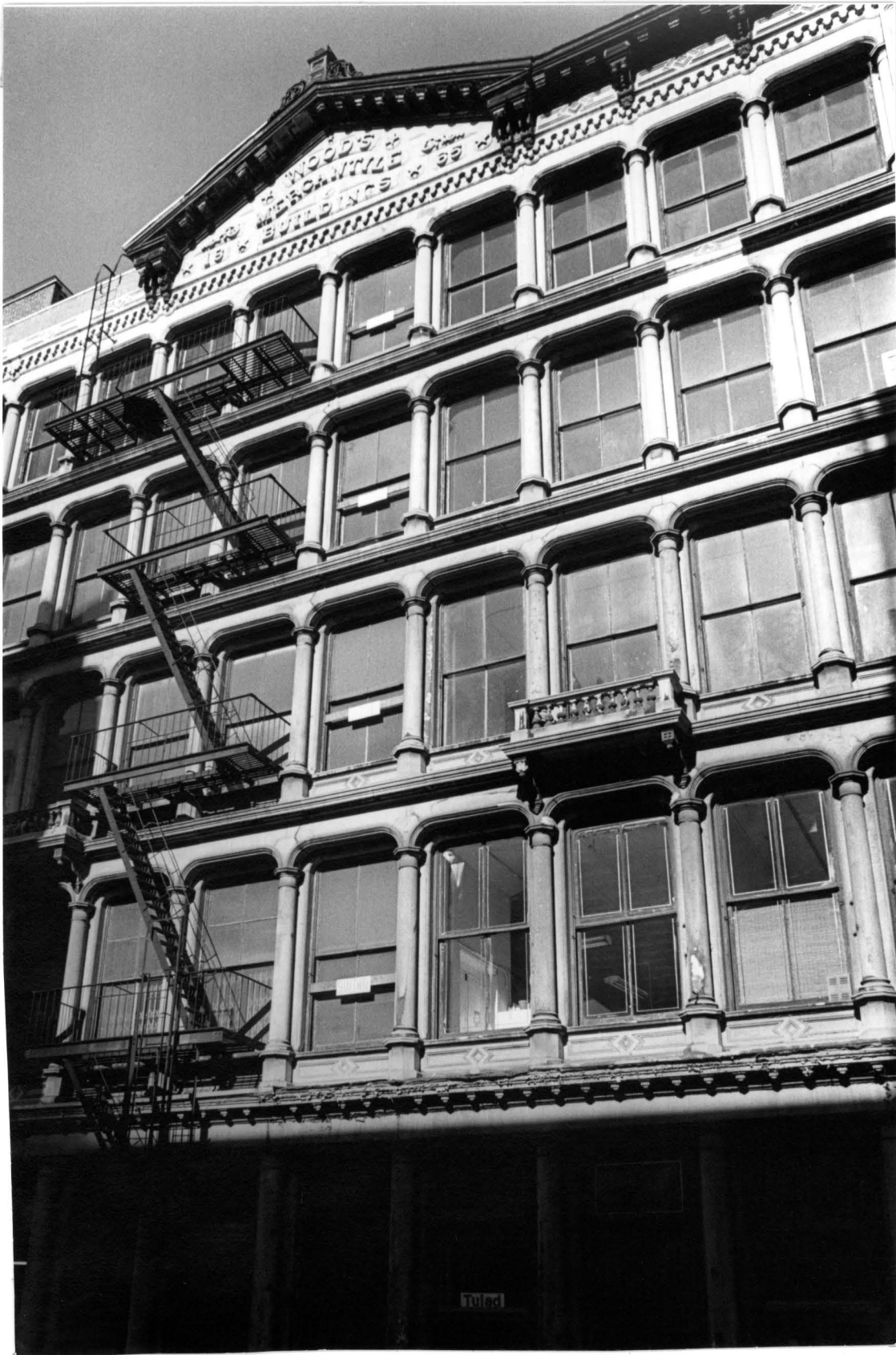


Photo Credit:
Michael Stein

Woods Mercantile Buildings

Built 1865