

Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 23, 1980, Designation List 137
LP-1091

KNOX BUILDING
452 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan
Built 1901-02
Architect John H. Duncan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 841, Lot 49.

On September 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Knox Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). 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. Letters have been received supporting the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Knox Building, one of the finest Beaux-Arts style commercial buildings in the city, was designed by the notable New York City architect John H. Duncan. Built in 1901-02 as the headquarters of the Knox Hat Company, the building occupies an especially prominent midtown Manhattan location on Fifth Avenue at 40th Street opposite the New York Public Library.

The Knox Hat Company had been founded in 1838 by Charles Knox at 110 Fulton Street, east of Broadway.¹ Much of lower Manhattan had been devastated by a major fire in 1835. In the period of recovery which followed, New York's retail businesses began to locate along Broadway and the adjacent side streets. The Knox Company undoubtedly benefited from the popularity of beaver hats during that period, and business prospered until the Civil War. Sometime after the Civil War the company was taken over by Edward M. Knox (1841?-1916), son of the founder. The younger Knox had enlisted with the Eighth New York Volunteers in the Union army after the fall of Fort Sumter, supposedly when he was only 17.² Commissioned a second lieutenant in the 15th Independent Light Battery H of the Irish Brigade (69th Regiment), he fought in the battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. He was wounded in the last of these, and "almost completely paralyzed by the bullet in his thigh he was carried to the rear and later found by his father in a ruined church at Gettysburg."³ He remained paralyzed for over two years, but recovered after an operation and rest cure in Geneva, Switzerland. Knox then returned to New York to assume management of the family hat business.⁴ The company had been having financial difficulties because of litigation over a trademark⁵ and the destruction of the Fulton Street store in the 1865 fire that burned down the nearby P.T. Barnum's museum at Broadway and Ann Street. Edward Knox turned the business around and continued to expand "with the intention of

making his name known wherever a hat was sold."⁶ The downtown store was rebuilt at 212 Broadway, next door to the National Park Bank. This branch later moved into the Singer Building. As the fashionable shopping district moved northward on Broadway and Sixth Avenue to the area between Union Square and Madison Square, the Knox Hat Company followed the trend, opening another store in the Fifth Avenue Hotel at 23rd Street. Knox decided that the company should undertake its own hat manufacturing and established the Knox Hat Factory at St. Mark's and Grand Avenues in Brooklyn. A large brick structure with a corner tower, the building survives although without the mansard roof and four-faced clock that surmounted the tower. Below the clock was the inscription "Knox the Hatter."

Knox's own fortunes continued to expand with those of the company. He also invested profitably in real estate. In 1892 he was voted a medal of honor by the United States Congress for bravery at Gettysburg. The Grand Army of the Republic gave him a jeweled sword of honor as "the most popular and handsomest officer of the encampment."⁷ He was also elected colonel of the 69th Regiment and continued to use the title until his death.

By the turn of the century New York's retail trade was continuing its uptown move, establishing itself on Fifth Avenue between 34th and 42nd Streets. Among the prestigious merchants who located there were B. Altman (1906), Tiffany (1906), Gorham (1906), Lord & Taylor (1897-98), and Arnold Constable (1915-16). In 1901 Colonel Knox purchased land on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 40th Street, across from the site of the recently vacated reservoir where the New York Public Library was under construction, and commissioned a building from the noted New York architect John H. Duncan.

Duncan (1855-1929), a founding member of the Architectural League of New York in 1881, had established his own architectural practice in 1886. Shortly thereafter he won the competition to design the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, dedicated to the men who fought in the Union forces during the Civil War. Built in 1889-92, it is a monumental arch in the Roman Imperial tradition. In 1890 Duncan won the competition to design the General Grant National Memorial, more familiarly known as Grant's Tomb. Built in 1891-97, it too was inspired by the Classical sources of Greek and Roman architecture. Colonel Knox had extensive connections with Civil War veterans and was an officer in the Grant Monument Association; undoubtedly Knox had met Duncan in his capacity as architect for the two memorials. Following his work on the two monuments, Duncan began to acquire a clientele of affluent New Yorkers who commissioned him to design residences on the Upper East Side, in midtown Manhattan, and on West 76th Street. For his residential designs Duncan preferred the French sources promulgated by the Ecole des Beau-Arts in Paris, and rusticated facades, large scale ornamental details, and imposing mansard roofs are favored motifs. Examples of this type may be seen in the Philip Lehman residence (1899-1900), West 54th Street, The Thomas J. McLaughlin

house (1902), 8 East 62nd Street; and the Henri Wertheim residence (1901), 4 East 67th Street.

While the use of the Beaux-Arts style was not uncommon for New York commercial buildings at the turn of the century, the style is more often associated with residences, such as those Duncan himself designed, hotels, and public buildings, such as the contemporary New York Public Library. Duncan was able to take advantage of the prominent corner site enjoyed by the Knox Building to create a ten-story office building which would be striking in its own right and also be a major advertising statement for the Knox Hat Company.

Full facade rustication, large scale ornament, and a two-story mansard roof are all features carried over from Duncan's residential designs but here skillfully adapted to a large commercial building. The rusticated limestone facade rises virtually uninterrupted for the first six stories on the Fifth Avenue front, punctuated only by large window openings. Buff brick simulating rustication is used above the second floor on the 40th Street side. Originally the hat store was located at the first floor which also incorporated a mezzanine level. Early photos show an iron and glass marquee and canopy shielding the Fifth Avenue show windows.⁸ A simple cornice above the first floor helps define the base of the building. Above the second floor windows on the Fifth Avenue front is a palm branch motif with centered female head, while on the 40th Street side the second floor windows are defined by keyed blocks. This motif is repeated at the 40th Street windows up to the sixth floor, and quoins flank the end bays. A bold dentiled cornice carried on overscaled console brackets, some with garlands, surmounts the sixth floor and provides a transition to the upper stories of the building. The cornice, unfortunately, has lost its delicate metal railing. The seventh and eighth stories are handled as a unit with the windows flanked by brick piers and separated by ornamented spandrels. Those on the Fifth Avenue front and 40th Street end bays have lions'-heads, ornate cartouches flank the Fifth Avenue windows and those in the end bays on 40th Street just below the bracketed eighth story cornice. Decorative window guards are placed at the bases of the third through eighth story windows. Above the eighth story rises the imposing two-story mansard roof with a series of elaborate dormers. That on the Fifth Avenue front is a triple dormer with a gabled two-story center opening flanked by smaller windows. A large female head surmounts the gable. The 40th Street side has two-story dormers in the end bays flanking a series of gabled one-story dormers. Rising behind the one-story dormers are three large window openings, each with a vertically-arranged triple sash. Although these openings have a distinctly modern look. Early photographs indicate that these openings were a part of the original design.⁹ Then, however, each was filled with nine narrow panes of glass. The mansard is crowned by an intricate torch and anthemion cresting with eagles, an appropriate termination to this exuberant design. Whether conscious or not, this emphasis on the roof, as well as on the tower of the factory building, seems entirely appropriate for a hat manufacturer and retailer.

Knox retained ownership of the Knox Building until his death. In 1903 he had split the company into the Knox Hat Manufacturing Company and the E.M. Knox Hat Retail Company. Offices for the companies and the main retail store were located in the building. Other offices in the building were leased out to various businesses. Relatively minor changes were made at the base of the building in 1926, in conjunction with the widening of Fifth Avenue, and in 1941 and 1948 with the replacement of vault lights.¹⁰ In 1964-65 the Knox Building was converted for use as the headquarters of the Republic National Bank. The architectural firm of Kahn & Jacobs was hired to alter the former Knox store space for banking facilities. The mezzanine was removed, large plate glass windows were installed, and three ornamented piers on the 40th Street side were replaced by rusticated ones. The overall effect is sensitive and compatible with the original character of the building.

Today the Knox Building remains one of the finest Beaux-Arts style commercial buildings in New York City. Its fortuitous location opposite the terraces of the New York Public Library, allows Duncan's design to be seen to full advantage for a considerable length of Fifth Avenue. It is a striking tribute to Duncan's talents as a designer and a vivid reminder of the prestigious Knox Hat Company and the prominent position it enjoyed among the retail shops of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century.

Report prepared by
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FOOTNOTES

1. King's Views of New York, 1911-1912, (Boston: Moses King, 1911), P. 68.
2. According to Knox's obituary (New York Times, March 29, 1916, P.11), he died in his 75th year. This would have made Knox 20 or 21 at the time of the fall of Fort Sumter (1861). The same obituary states his enlistment at the age of 17.
3. New York Times, March 29, 1916, P. 11.
4. The exact date is unclear. His obituary states he took charge of the company "more than 40 years ago," which would indicate a date of c.1875 yet it also seems to indicate he took over in c.1865.
5. Trademark litigation troubled the company again in 1912 when the Knox Hat Retail Company sold hats with the Knox trademark which had not been made by the Knox Hat Manufacturing Company (New York Times, May 18, 1912, P.16).

6. New York Times, March 29, 1916, P. 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Architectural Record, 13 (May 1903), 454;
King's Views, 1911-1912, P. 68.
9. Ibid.
10. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan,
Alt. 1695-1926, Alt. 1861-1941, Alt. 2063-1948.

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 Knox 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, Knox Building is one of the finest Beaux-Arts style commercial buildings in New York City; that it was designed by the notable New York City architect John H. Duncan who had achieved his reputation with his designs for the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch and Grant's Tomb; that such favored motifs as full facade rustication, large scale ornament, and a two-story mansard roof are carried over from Duncan's residential designs and here skillfully transmuted to a large commercial building; that because of the fortuitous corner site opposite the New York Public Library, Duncan was able to create a ten-story office building which would be striking in its own right and also be a major advertising statement for the Knox Hat Company; and that it remains a striking tribute to Duncan's talents as a designer and a vivid reminder of the Knox Hat Company and the prominent position it enjoyed among the retail shops of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century.

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 Knox Building, 452 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designated Tax Map Block 841, Lot 49, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo Credit
C.D. Staff
Landmarks Preservation Comm.

THE KNOX BUILDING
425 Fifth Ave.

Built: 1901-02
Architect:
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Photo Credit:
John B. Bayley

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