

9-11 WEST 54th STREET HOUSE (James J. Goodwin Residence), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1896-98; architects McKim, Mead & White

Landmarks Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 27.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 9-11 West 54th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing was continued to January 8, 1980 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 20 witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters and petitions have been received supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This distinguished residence was built in 1896-98 for James Junius Goodwin, a prominent New York businessman. Designed in the neo-Georgian style by the firm of McKim, Mead & White, it is a handsome reminder of the fashionable town houses that once characterized the West Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and is one of an ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street.

Midtown Manhattan remained open farmland until the first half of the 19th century when shanty towns, rubbish dumps, stockyards, and factories began to appear above West 40th Street. The landscaping of Central Park, commenced in 1857, helped spur the development of midtown, and during the building boom that followed the Civil War, the West Forties and Fifties became lined with brick and stone residences. These new houses ranged from lavish Fifth Avenue mansions commissioned by such individual clients as the Vanderbilts to middle-class dwellings erected on a speculative basis.

The house at 9-11 West 54th Street occupies part of the original site of St. Luke's Hospital (1858), which fronted on West 55th Street at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue. The hospital dominated the east end of the block until new quarters were erected on Amsterdam Avenue at 113th Street in 1896. That same year, construction began on the University Club, designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White and located at the northwest corner of West 54th Street and Fifth Avenue. During the next few years several fashionable residences were constructed on the north side of West 54th Street. Together with the University Club, a designated New York City Landmark, they typify the fine turn-of-the-century residences and private clubs that transformed the Fifties near Fifth Avenue and Fifth Avenue itself into an exclusive neighborhood--part of the continuing northward residential trend in Manhattan. Many of the buildings were designed by New York's leading architects for the city's most prominent and affluent citizens, such as James J. Goodwin.

James Junius Goodwin (1836-1915), a cousin and business partner of the famed financier J. Pierpont Morgan, was a director of the Erie Railroad, the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company, and the Hartford Fire Insurance Company. His son, Philip Goodwin, was later one of the architects of the Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53rd Street.

Goodwin commissioned the firm of McKim, Mead & White to design his double residence at 9-11 West 54th Street in 1896, the same year the firm began work on the University Club at 1 West 54th Street. The firm, one of the most famous and productive in the history of American architecture, played a leading role in promoting classically-inspired styles in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The influence of McKim, Mead & White was especially strong in New York, and the firm designed many buildings in and around the city, of which approximately 75 have been designated New York City Landmarks or are in historic districts. The styles used by them, while always classically inspired, vary significantly. The University Club, for example, is a very fine example of the Italian Renaissance style, while the design of the Goodwin residence is based on 18th-century English Georgian and American architecture.

The design for the double house at 9-11 West 54th Street, in fact, derives from Charles Bulfinch's third Harrison Gray Otis house, built on Beacon Street in Boston in 1806, and it was in Boston in the early 1890s that McKim, Mead & White began to popularize the forms of neo-Georgian and neo-Federal design for urban residential architecture. While the proportions of the Goodwin residence have a more vertical emphasis, the facade design is very similar to that of the Bulfinch-designed house. The firm of McKim, Mead & White was clearly impressed by the beautiful attenuated lines, symmetry, and classical order of the Bulfinch design. The design of the Otis house, in turn, was influenced by the work of the 18th-century British architect, Robert Adam, whose architectural and decorative designs had a strong impact on late 18th and early 19th-century American builders.

The five-bay, four-and-one-half story structure at 9-11 West 54th Street is distinguished by an ordered facade that projects slightly from the building plane and by fine stone detailing. Although the building housed two dwelling units--a larger three-bay unit at No. 11 and a smaller two-bay section at No. 9 -- the facade was designed as a symmetrical whole. Three brick upper stories rest on a rusticated limestone base that forms the ground floor of the building, fronted by a handsome wrought-iron fence. The entrance to No. 11, set at the center of the stone base, is marked by a portico composed of fluted Ionic columns with Scamozzi capitals and a carved panel with a small cartouche, while the more simply treated entrance to No. 9, with Ionic pilasters and a modillioned entablature and a similar carved panel, is located on the far right of the front wall. Three crisply recessed windows crowned by paneled keystones complete the composition of the first story, which is separated from the upper floors by a band course carved with a fret pattern. Above, elongated double-hung windows light the second, principal story. These windows have striking stone enframements with foliate brackets and paneled entablatures very similar to those on the Otis house. Each window is fronted by a low iron balcony, an element commonly found

on 18th-century English town houses. A large balcony over the entrance portico marks the center window and a second balcony appears directly above. The third and fourth stories, which diminish in height and are separated by a molded stone string course, are lit by double-hung windows crowned by splayed stone lintels with paneled keystones. The building is crowned by a modillioned cornice and a stone balustrade that serves as a balcony for the five dormers that pierce the copper-clad mansard at attic level. The exterior remains almost intact and is undergoing restoration.

James J. Goodwin and his wife, Josephine Goodwin, resided at the larger No. 11 West 54th Street unit and leased No. 9 to a number of families. These included Mr. and Mrs. Elijah P. Smith and Mr. and Mrs. Francis de Ruyter Wissmann. In 1921-22, No. 9 was occupied by Walter Goodwin, a son of Mr. and Mrs. James Goodwin. After James Goodwin died in 1915, Josephine Goodwin continued to live at No. 11.

In the years following World War I, the mansions of Fifth Avenue and the fine residences of the adjacent Fifties side streets began to give way to commercial and apartment house development. Most of the town houses which survived were altered for commercial use on the ground floors. A portion of 54th Street west of Fifth Avenue was a rare exception to this trend. The Goodwin residence was sold in 1944 to the Parsonage Point Realty Co., Inc., which leased the structure to the Rhodes Preparatory School in 1946. The school occupied the building until 1979, when the structure was sold to the United States Trust Company which is currently renovating and restoring the building to house an office of the bank. With its elegant neo-Georgian design it is an excellent example of the residential work of McKim, Mead & White and is a distinguished reminder of the fine residences that lined the blocks west of Fifth Avenue during the turn of the century.

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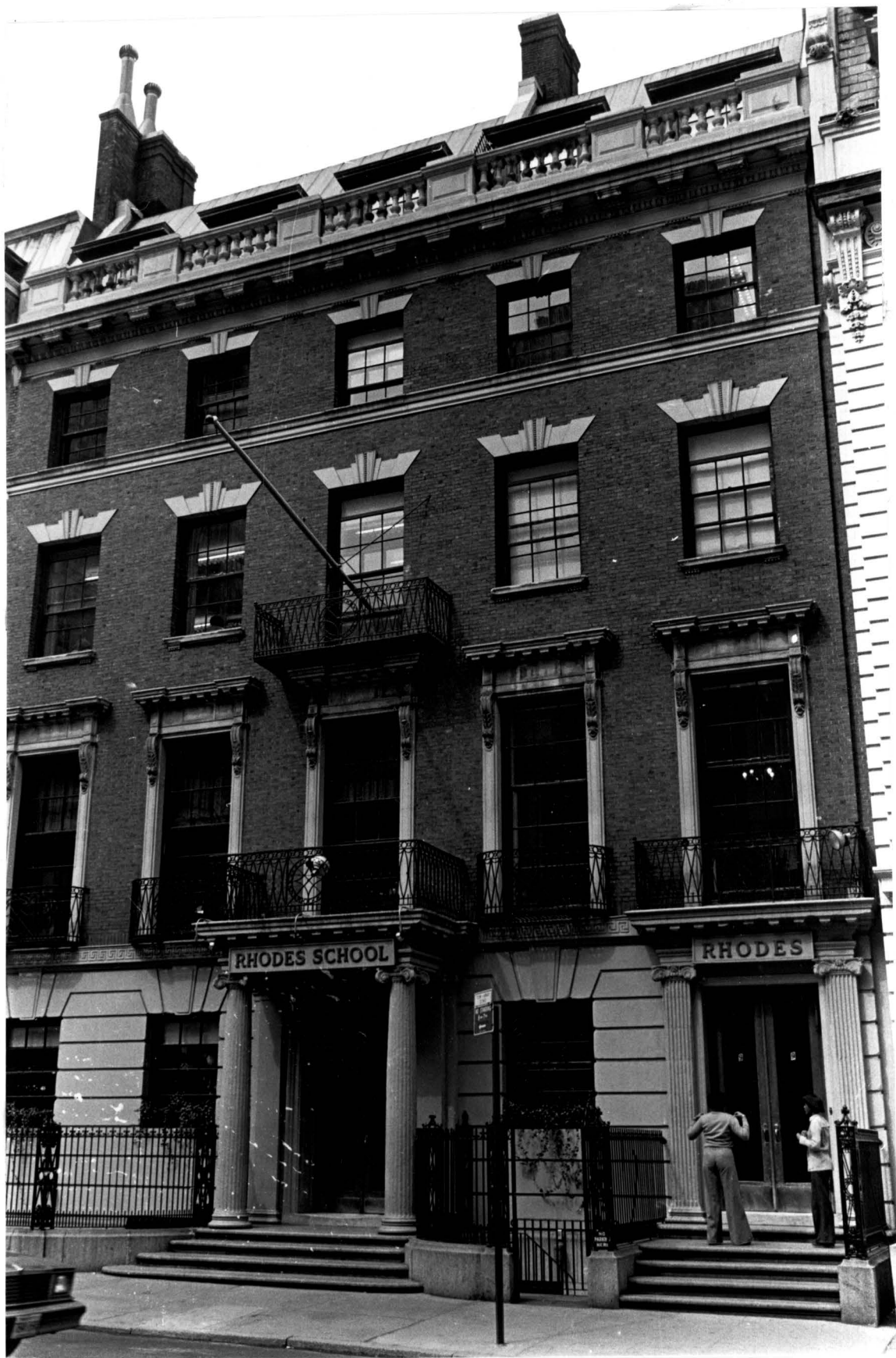
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