

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 3, 1981, Designation List 139
LP - 1105

15 WEST 54th STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1896-97;
architect Henry J. Hardenbergh.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 25.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 15 West 54th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to January 8, 1980 (Item No. 6). 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 handsome town house was built in 1896-97 as one of a pair with No. 13 West 54th Street for William Murray, a prominent businessman from Larchmont, New York. Designed in a Renaissance-inspired style by Henry Janeway Hardenbergh, the residence is a distinguished example 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 15 West 54th Street occupies part of the original site of St. Lukes 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 Nos. 13 and 15, the first of several fashionable residences to be built on the north side of West 54th Street. Together with the University Club (a designated New York City Landmark), constructed at 1 West 54th Street in 1896-1900, 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.

William Murray, was a prominent businessman and a noted yachtsman who lived in Larchmont, New York, and spent summers in Newport, Rhode Island. He was a director of the Dixon Crucible Company in Jersey City, N.J., the Title Guarantee Company, and the New York and Stamford Railway Company. He and his wife, Alice Teneycke Murray, resided in Larchmont for over 40 years and apparently built the 13 and 15 West 54th Street Houses as a real estate investment.

Murray chose one of New York's better-known architects to design this elegant pair of town houses. Henry Janeway Hardenbergh (1847-1918) began his career in 1865, when he entered the office of Detlef Lienau. Hardenbergh established his own architectural practice in 1871 and during the 1880s designed a number of large city office buildings and apartment hotels. In 1880 he began work on the now famous Dakota apartments at 1 West 72nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark. In 1885 he completed a handsome row of town houses on West 73rd Street, now part of the Central Park West-West 73rd-74th Street Historic District. Among Hardenbergh's many clients was William Astor, for whom Hardenbergh designed the Waldorf Hotel in 1893. Two years later, he completed a design for the Astoria Hotel, and soon became New York's leading hotel architect. His many works included the Hotel Manhattan (1896), the Plaza Hotel (1907), the Copley Plaza (1910) in Boston, and the New Willard Hotel (1901) in Washington, D.C. At the time of Hardenbergh's death in 1918, his extensive career was praised by the Architectural Record: "(He) erected structures in practically every accepted building manner, in accordance with the precept of the time, but always without losing that individuality which made him one of the foremost practitioners in the field."¹

Designed in a Renaissance-inspired style using detail in a picturesque manner, the 15 West 54th Street House is a fine example of Hardenbergh's residential architecture. No. 15 is slightly smaller than No. 13 and has four stories built above a basement but lacks the additional attic story of No. 13. With the exception of a differing roof line, Hardenbergh designed the limestone facade of No. 15 as a mirror image of No. 13. The three upper stories rise above a rusticated parlor floor where the main entrance is paired with that at No. 13. The house shares a prominent double stoop with No. 13 where curving staircases running east and west ascend to a central, double landing. Oval vents ornament the stoop wall at sidewalk level. Three windows, fronted by elaborate iron grillework, light the basement of the house, and a basement door with similar grillework is located under the stoop.

The handsome arched entrance of No. 15 is composed of a double door, fanlight, and decorative grillework. A curved balcony fronted by a stone balustrade appears directly above the entrance and serves the central second-story windows which are framed by eared architraves with crowning cartouches. The first and second stories are further distinguished by a two-story, three-bay curved oriel that flanks on one side the entrance, balcony, and windows. The oriel rests on a large console bracket carved with a grotesque human head.

This type of detail is characteristic of Hardenbergh's work and may also be seen on his West 73rd Street houses. The oriel, rusticated at parlor level, displays a richer treatment at the second story. Here, the stone piers that flank the oriel windows are marked by vermiculated blocks, a more elaborate form of rustication.

Rich ornament also articulates the third story of the building. The windows are centered on the facade, their heavy enframements embellished with vermiculated blocks that echo those at second story level. Elaborate foliate lintels capped with scroll keystones crown the windows. A molded string course runs across the facades directly over the windows, separating the third story from the floor above. The fourth story is lit by three flat-arched windows, flanked by incised terminal pedestals capped by volutes. A large carved plaque marks the division between Nos. 13 and 15, and an elaborate overhanging cornice, shared with No. 13, crowns the structure. A simple stone balustrade surmounts the cornice. The exterior of No. 15 is in excellent condition and retains its original architectural integrity. As such, it is an excellent document of Hardenbergh's domestic architecture.

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 15 West 54th Street House had been purchased from the Murrays in 1906 by James B. Dickson, the president of the Johnson & Higgins Insurance Company. Dickson's wife, Harriet, resided at that address until her death in 1953. Her estate was conveyed to Carl Siegesmund, who sold the property to Nelson Rockefeller, the son of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1955. From 1955 until the mid-1970s, No. 15 housed the Museum of Primitive Art. The property, along with No. 13, was sold to Bernard H. Mendik after Nelson Rockefeller's death in 1979, and is presently in use as offices. With its picturesque Renaissance-inspired design, the 15 West 54th Street House 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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Footnote

1. Architectural Record, 44(1918), 91.

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 15 West 54th 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 15 West 54th Street House is a handsome Renaissance-inspired town house designed as one of a pair with the 13 West 54th Street House; that it is a distinguished example of the residential architecture that once characterized the Fifties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; that it was designed by the noted New York architect Henry J. Hardenbergh as a mirror image of No. 13 and with its picturesque and imaginatively used detail is an excellent document of Hardenbergh's domestic architecture; that the house forms part of a handsome ensemble of five town houses on West 54th Street; that it was owned by members of the Rockefeller family; and that with its distinguished architectural features it is a reminder of the exclusive neighborhood of the Fifties and 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 15 West 54th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 25, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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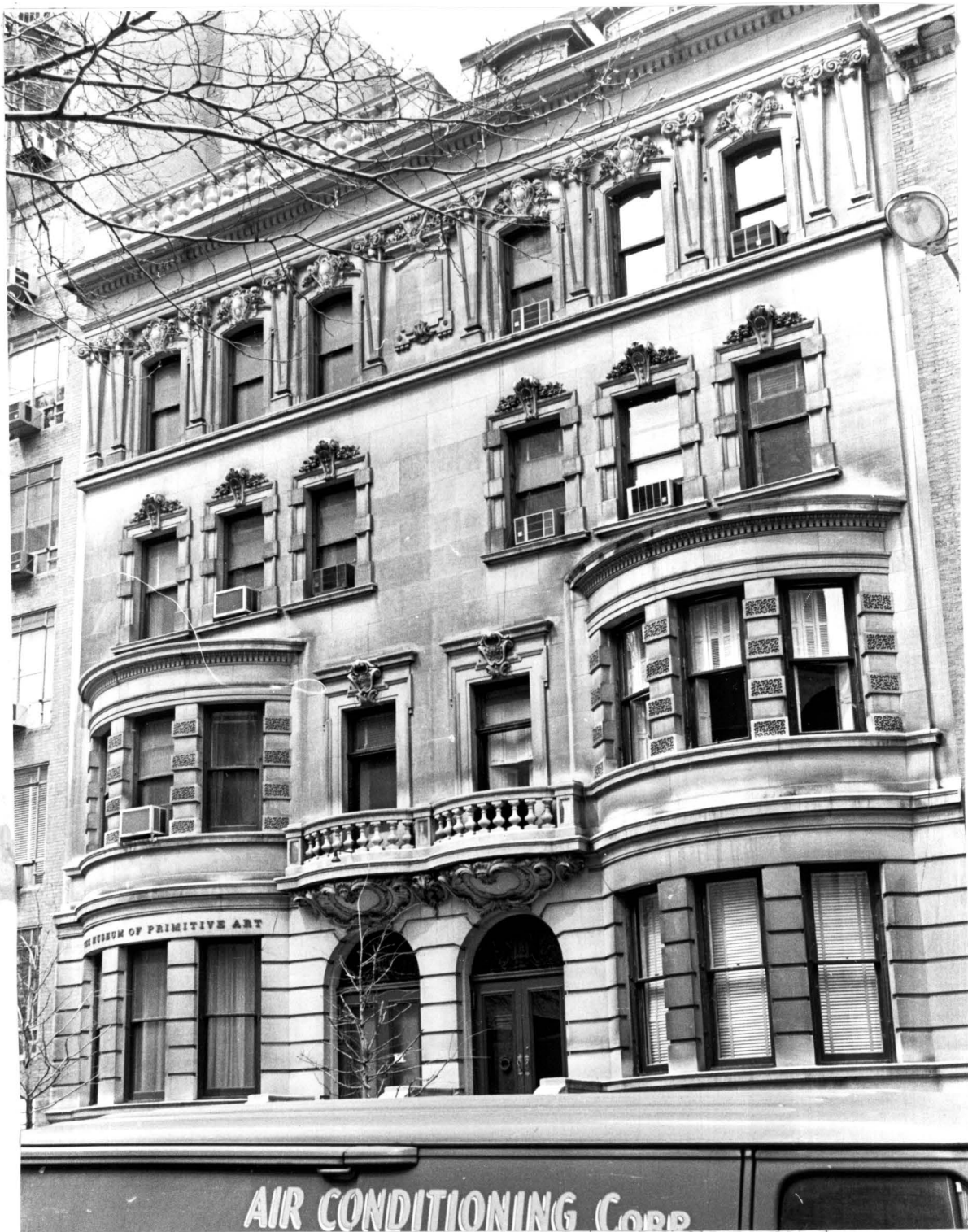
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