

SIDEWALK CLOCK, 522 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. 1907, Manufacturer: Seth Thomas Co.

Landmark Site: The portion of the sidewalk on which the described improvement is situated adjacent to Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1258, Lot 38.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Sidewalk Clock, 522 Fifth Avenue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.43). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

One of the most important and essential parts of New York's historical fabric is its "street furniture" -- lamp posts, street clocks, sign posts, and benches that enhance and maintain the intimacy and scale of neighborhood blocks. Perhaps the most striking of these street amenities are the oversize cast-iron post or sidewalk clocks that proudly dominate city sidewalks. These clocks proliferated in American cities well after the turn of the twentieth century but many have since fallen prey to automobile accidents and sidewalk ordinances. One of the few that exists in New York today is the clock at No. 522 Fifth Avenue.

Introduced in the 1860s, cast-iron street clocks were popular both as everyday conveniences and as novel advertising devices. A small business concern that stayed in the same location year after year would buy a street clock and install it directly in front of the store, often painting the name of the business onto the clock face. When the business owners moved, they usually took their clocks with them.

Readily available from catalogues for about 600 dollars, street clocks were manufactured by several clock companies. At the forefront in the East were the Seth Thomas Company and the E. Howard Clock Company. Seth Thomas (1785-1859), who established the Seth Thomas Clock Company in 1861, was one of America's pioneer clock manufacturers. Edward Howard (1813-1904), who founded the E. Howard Clock & Watch Company in 1861, developed an extremely successful clock business in Massachusetts, with a New York office located at 532 Broadway. Howard with his partner Aaron L. Dennison created the first mass-produced pocket watch, and marketed banjo clocks, figure eight clocks, grandfather, wall, and tower clocks, all of his own design. The E. Howard Clock Company, which manufactured the clocks at No. 1501 Third Avenue and No. 783 Fifth Avenue, produced sidewalk clocks as late as 1964. The company started to manufacture the street clocks around 1870 and at one time had a patent on them. Street clocks were operated by a mechanism based on a weight calculated according to the number of feet needed for its fall. The weight was wound up into its highest position and would run for about eight days. Later the clocks were mechanized and operated from master clocks inside the building, and had secondary movements. Measuring about fifteen feet from the sidewalk to the center of the dial, the clocks were larger than human scale, handsome eye-catchers, and effective advertising devices. Designed with two or four faces, the clocks conformed to a basic composition, with the large round faces mounted on classical columns and bases.

Four of the city's extant clocks, all of which are the two-faced variety, stand in Manhattan. A superb example is located at No. 522 Fifth Avenue near the southwest corner of 44th Street in front of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company. The double-faced clock was manufactured in 1907 by the Seth Thomas Company and originally stood in front of the American Trust Company at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street. When that bank merged with the Guaranty Trust Company in the 1930s, the clock was moved to its present location. The clock faces rest on foliate scroll brackets atop a fluted post and base decorated with classically inspired ornament. The dials, marked by Roman numerals, are rimmed by an acanthus leaf molding and crowned by an ornate pineapple motif. Nineteen feet tall, this is indeed an elegant clock.

These handsome cast-iron street clocks of New York represent an increasingly rare sampling of a type of street amenity that once proliferated. They are, in most cases, masterpieces of cast-iron workmanship, beautifully designed, and prominent sidewalk landmarks. As an essential part of the city's urban fabric, they make a very special and significant contribution to the New York streetscape.

Report prepared by Rachel Carley,
Research Department

Report typed by Barbara Sklar

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this structure, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Sidewalk Clock, 522 Fifth Avenue, 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 Street Clock at 522 Fifth Avenue, is one of a group of street clocks which form one of the most important parts of New York's historical and urban fabric, that these clocks enhance and maintain the intimacy and scale of neighborhood blocks, that they represent a small extant sample of a clock type that once proliferated in New York and other American cities well after the turn of the century; that some represent the work of Seth Thomas and E. Howard Clock Companies, leading clock manufacturers of their day; that they are masterpieces of cast-iron workmanship and exhibit handsome, classically inspired designs; and that as important and increasingly rare street amenities they make a very special and significant contribution to New York's streetscape.

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 Sidewalk Clock, 522 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates the portion of the sidewalk on which the described improvement is situated adjacent to Tax Map Block 1258, Lot 38, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbot, Henry. The Watch Factories of America. Chicago, 1888.

Friends of Cast Iron Architecture. Research files.

Moore, N. Hudson. The Old Clock Book. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1911.

Palmer, Brooks. A Treasury of American Clocks. Second Edition. New York: McMillan Co., 1968.

"Plan Would Preserve Old Sidewalk Clocks." Park East News. May 1980.

"Time to Save the Clocks." Daily News. April 21, 1980.