

ASSOCIATION RESIDENCE FOR RESPECTABLE AGED INDIGENT FEMALES (Association Residence for Women), 891 Amsterdam Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1881-83; Architect Richard Morris Hunt; addition 1907-08; Architect Charles A. Rich.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1855, Lot 50.

On February 9, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Association Residence for Respectable Aged Indigent Females (Association Residence for Women), and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Fourteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Association Residence for Respectable Aged Indigent Females, a prominent feature of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood of Manhattan's Upper West Side, was constructed in 1881-83 for one of New York City's oldest charitable institutions. The design, in a French-inspired style which recalls the Victorian Gothic, was by the "dean" of nineteenth-century American architects, Richard Morris Hunt. The building remains one of Hunt's few surviving significant New York City structures and a fine example of nineteenth-century institutional architecture.

The Association

In the midst of the nation's involvement in the War of 1812, a group of socially prominent New York City women formed an association in 1813 to aid women who were left poor widows by the current war or by the previous Revolutionary War. Chartered in 1814 as one of New York City's earliest charitable institutions, it became known as the Association for the Relief of Respectable Aged Indigent Females. The aid initially took the form of money, food, and clothing "to relieve and to comfort those aged females, who once enjoyed a good degree of affluence, but now reduced to poverty by the vicissitudes of Providence."¹ A subscription list was started in 1833 for the construction of an asylum building. John Jacob Astor gave the first monetary donation, while Peter G. Stuyvesant donated three lots. The asylum was finally erected at 226 East 20th Street in 1837-38 (an infirmary building was added in 1845). The asylum was intended as an alternative to "the common almshouse, filled as it usually is with the dregs of society, which is not a place of comfort to persons of refined sensibilities."²

As the Association soon outgrew its limited facilities, plans were made to construct a new building. As early as 1843 the Association owned land along Fourth Avenue between East 78th and 79th Streets³ and by 1865 had received monetary bequests for a new building. In 1868 the Association reported that "architectural plans have been presented, discussed, and decided upon."⁴ These plans were executed by architect Richard Morris Hunt in a French-inspired style with recalls the Victorian Gothic.⁵ However, doubts soon arose over the proposed location due to "the rapid growth of the city, and the invasion of three lines of public steam travel."⁶

No further action was taken until 1881, when it was decided that a new building was crucial. The Association desired "some location farther uptown, where a site easy of access and suitable for the purpose might be obtained at a cost much less than one in the heart of the city."⁷ A site consisting of twenty lots at Tenth (Amsterdam) Avenue between West 103rd and 104th Streets in the Manhattan

Valley area of Manhattan was purchased by the Association in June 1881.⁸ The Manhattan Valley area was being developed with the recent completion of the elevated railway extending along Ninth Avenue with a stop at West 104th Street. Construction of the Association building began in September 1881 with John J. Tucker as builder. Richard Morris Hunt, the architect of the 1868 scheme, was retained as architect.⁹ It was felt by the Association that Hunt's "name in itself is a sufficient guarantee that all that pertains thereto will be executed in a substantial manner and in good taste."¹⁰ Hunt produced several similar variations for the design of the building.¹¹ The building was occupied in June 1883, and was formally opened in December 1883, during the seventieth anniversary of the Association. Present were such noted figures as Mrs. William E. Dodge and Mrs. Russell Sage, while one of the addresses was delivered by Rev. Charles C. Tiffany. It was noted that "the degree of comfort, almost amounting to luxury, which is manifest in every detail of the establishment, elicited from many visitors yesterday the remark that they would 'like to be old women.'"¹² The Residence was open to any respectable non-Roman Catholic gentlewoman over sixty years of age, on payment of \$150 and the surrender of any property she possessed.

Richard Morris Hunt (1827-1895)

The designer of the new Association residence, Richard Morris Hunt, was one of America's preeminent, honored, and influential architects of the nineteenth century. The first American architect to be trained at the French École des Beaux-Arts (1846-52), Hunt was credited by architect Charles McKim as "the pioneer and ice-breaker who paved the way for the recognition of the profession by the public."¹³ Hunt came to be considered the "dean" of American architects. In 1857 he was named secretary of the newly formed American Institute of Architects and opened an atelier, based upon the principles and methods of the École, that was to train some of the country's foremost architects (including Henry Van Brunt, Charles D. Gambrill, George B. Post, William R. Ware, and Frank Furness). From 1888 to 1891 Hunt served as third president of the American Institute of Architects, and in 1892 he was the first architect to receive an honorary degree from Harvard University. In 1893 Hunt received three significant honors: he was elected a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts; he was the first American to receive the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects; and he served as the architect of the Administration Building (the most prominent commission) at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Hunt has become most widely identified as the architect of residences for the Vanderbilts and other extremely wealthy patrons of the Gilded Age, but he actually executed a wide range of commissions (including commercial and institutional structures, monuments, and mausoleums), in a variety of styles. Upon his return to the United States from Europe in 1855, Hunt first worked with architect Thomas U. Walter on the extension of the U.S. capitol. His first major work in New York City, the Studio Building (51-55 West 10th Street, 1857-58, demolished), contained residential and studio space and became a center of New York City's artistic life. Hunt is credited with designing New York City's first apartment building (or "French Flats"), the Stuyvesant Apartments (142 East 18th Street, 1869-70, demolished). In the 1860s he began to design a series of summer residences in Newport, Rhode Island, most notably the Stick style Griswold House (1861-63). Hunt's Tribune Building (Nassau and Spruce Streets, 1873-76, demolished) was one of New York City's earliest skyscrapers.

In 1878 Hunt began a long association with the Vanderbilt family, designing the Francois I-style William K. Vanderbilt mansion (660 Fifth Avenue, 1878-82, demolished) which immediately set the trend for the rest of Fifth Avenue. As Baker notes "by the mid-1880s Hunt had become the most fashionable architect of his time, and some undoubtedly considered a house designed by him to be a badge of high social position."¹⁴ Hunt designed a number of other Fifth Avenue mansions (none of which survive), including those for William V. Lawrence (1890-91), Elbridge Gerry (1891-94), and a double residence for Mrs. William Astor and John Jacob Astor IV (1891-95). During this same period, Hunt was commissioned to design lavish summer residences for the same families in Newport. His work in that town culminated in The Breakers (1892-95), based on a Renaissance palazzo, for Cornelius Vanderbilt II. One of Hunt's last, most elaborate, and important commissions (in collaboration with landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted) was Biltmore (1888-95), the Francois I-inspired chateau of George W. Vanderbilt near Asheville, North Carolina.

Relatively little of Hunt's New York City architecture has survived. Of some seventy-five structures known to have been designed and built by Hunt in New York City, fewer than twenty are still standing. Besides the Association Residence, the significant structures include: the cast-iron Roosevelt Building (478-482 Broadway, 1873-74) in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District; the pedestal and base of the Statue of Liberty (1881-85), a designated New York City Landmark and National Monument; the Vanderbilt Mausoleum (1884-89) in the Moravian Cemetery, Staten Island; the Jackson Square Library (251 West 13th Street, 1887-88) in the Greenwich Village Historic District; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art Wing "D" incorporating the main facade (Fifth Avenue and East 82nd Street, 1894-1902), a designated New York City Landmark.

The Style of the Association Residence

Greatly influenced by English and French nineteenth-century architectural theorists John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), American architects in the 1860s and '70s showed revived interest in European Gothic architectural forms.¹⁵ In the United States this was often manifested in what is called the Victorian Gothic style which is generally characterized by the use of polychromy and the pointed arch, the contrast of materials, scale and detailing, and complex rooflines composed of gables, dormers, turrets, and towers. Two early examples of the style are the Trinity Church Parish House (13 West 25th Street, 1860, Jacob Wrey Mould), now part of the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava complex, a designated New York City Landmark, and the National Academy of Design (Park Avenue and East 23rd Street, 1863-65, Peter B. Wight, demolished), both of which were based on English precedents.

The style of the Association Residence, while sometimes called Victorian Gothic, does not look so much to English as to French sources, in keeping with Hunt's French training and predilections. Architectural historian Francis Kowsky comments that "the influence exerted on American post-Civil War building by French architecture, in general, and Viollet's theories, in particular, has yet to be studied."¹⁶ Hunt's contemporary, New York and Chicago architect Peter B. Wight noted that Hunt was "at one time...largely influenced by the teachings of Viollet-le-Duc."¹⁷ Hunt's style during this period has been characterized by one architectural historian as an avant-garde one, employing forms of the English Victorian Gothic and the French Second Empire and neo-Grec.¹⁸ His first essay in this mode was the Presbyterian Hospital (Madison Avenue and East 70th Street, 1868-72, demolished), which suggested a rather abstracted Gothic style without

using Gothic detailing.¹⁹ In 1895, architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler stated that, "it would not be unfair to describe the most characteristic of his works from 1870 to 1880 as a persistent but unsuccessful attempt to avoid Gothic architecture. It was quite feasible to avoid mediaeval detail, but the spirit and idea, the composition and grouping distinctly recalled Gothic work in buildings in which not a single Gothic form was suffered to appear."²⁰

Hunt's first design for the Association Residence was begun in 1868, the same year the Presbyterian Hospital was underway. The elements of his characteristic style appeared in the polychromy, picturesque roof treatment with dormers, the Gothic pointed arches, and neo-Grec detail on the window enframements. As finally built, the Association residence preserves such features as the polychromy, roof dormers and cornertowers set in a mansard roof, and entrance detailed with neo-Grec forms.

Design of the Association Residence²¹

The Association Residence building as seen today was built in two stages. The original 85-room building is a squared C-shape in plan, the north wing longer than the south (which is no longer visible from the street) because of a semi-octagonal one-story extension at its east end. The masonry load-bearing walls are faced with dark red brick laid in running bond and rise three full stories from the rock-faced brownstone ashlar basement with water table to the slate-covered mansard roof. A wide areaway, bordered by an ornamental wrought-iron railing (erected in 1904),²² extends along the street elevations of the building.

The single public entrance is centered on the original thirteen-bay Amsterdam Avenue facade and is protected by a brownstone porch with rock-faced base. Three arched openings accent the front and a narrow rectangular one is placed on each side. The segmental arches rest on stylized capitals. Access to the porch is gained by a pair of L-shaped stairs which lead from the sidewalk by way of an intermediate landing. The original Amsterdam Avenue elevation is enhanced by four symmetrically arranged projecting pavilions. The two pavilions which flank the main entrance extend upward from the foundation through the full height of the building above the eaves, terminating in steeply pitched gables outlined by brownstone copings. The other two project only above the first story and are supported by paired stone brackets. The pavilion at the northwest corner which takes the form of a tower rises above the eave line and terminates in a pyramidal roof accented by dormers, while the roof treatment of the southern pavilion is like that of the other two. The strong vertical rhythm is repeated in the series of three brick and stone dormers set in the mansard roof between each pavilion. The gables and dormers are accented by stone coping and the remnants of stone cross-shaped finials. The rich and varied roof treatment, with the use of a corner tower, is characteristic of much of Hunt's work. These picturesque elements, seen most often in Hunt's residential commissions, were taken from medieval European sources. The metal cornice of the building is supported by brownstone scroll-bracketed modillion blocks, beneath which is a continuous stone frieze, flush with the surface of the brick wall. A stone belt course extends the length of the building above the first story windows. A stone stringcourse occurs beneath the windows of each story. All windows have simple stone lintels.

The north facade at 104th Street, consisting of eight bays, follows a similar pattern and identical detailing to the main facade. The northeast end is terminated by a corner pavilion with pyramidal roof similar to that at the northwest corner, connected to a simple one-story semi-octagonal extension. The building

no longer has its ornamental metal finials once found atop each of the corner pavilions.

The rear facades of the building have a somewhat irregular pattern of fenestration. All windows have simple stone lintels and slightly projecting sills. The cornice and mansard roof wrap only partially around the courtyard facades of the extending wings at the rear of the building. The walls then become a full brick fourth story capped by a corbelled brick parapet. Stone belt courses, flush with the wall, run beneath the third and fourth story windows. There is one exterior chimney at each of the two corners of the wings, and one interior chimney at the end of each wing.

The Addition

In 1907 philanthropist Mrs. Russell Sage donated money to extend the Association Residence southward to West 103rd Street, providing an additional thirty rooms and a larger chapel. The exterior was to be "in conformity with the present building and on the same lines."²³ The architect was Charles A. Rich.²⁴

Rich (1855-1943) was the senior partner in the firm of Rich, Mathesius, and Koyl, and was a former member (1882-1903) of the firm of Lamb & Rich. The firm was particularly noted for its commercial and institutional architecture in the Romanesque Revival, Queen Anne, neo-Gothic styles, including: Pratt Institute Main Building, Brooklyn (1885-87), a designated New York City Landmark; Millbank, Brinkerhoff, and Fiske Halls, Barnard College (1890-97); Harlem Club and Harlem Free Library (1889, 1892) in the Mt. Morris Park Historic District; and the Mt. Morris Bank (later Corn Exchange Bank) (1889) at 81-85 East 125th Street. They also designed residences in the Park Slope, Hamilton Heights, and Henderson Place Historic Districts.

The addition, constructed in 1907-08, extends and duplicates the original Hunt elevation on Amsterdam Avenue for an additional five bays. The southwest corner repeats the design of the original northwest corner pavilion. The addition along West 103rd Street is a wing extending parallel to the original south wing, separated from it by a narrow areaway. The addition's south and rear facades repeat the design of the northern end of the original building complete with corner tower, except for the inclusion of a two-story chapel. The chapel, with four bays which partially merge into the rest of the south facade, also extends from the east end of the addition. The chapel facade is articulated by molded stone lancet arches which alternate with slightly projecting stone and brick buttresses. Stone belt courses occur at the bottom of the windows and at the spring line of the arches (containing foliate decoration and carved heads). The original windows of the chapel (since removed) were by Tiffany Studios.

Conclusion

After 1965, when the interior was remodelled, the building became known as the Association Residence Nursing Home or the Association Residence for Women. The remaining residents were removed to another facility in 1974 when plans were developed to demolish the building and construct a new one. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in February 1975 and remained vacant. Much of the original slate roof was lost through a fire in July 1977. The city acquired the property in May 1978, and community development funds were allocated to repair the roof in 1981. Awaiting rehabilitation and occupancy,

the former Association Residence stands as a rare survival among Manhattan's nineteenth-century charitable institutions, designed by one of the nation's most distinguished architects.

Report prepared by
Jay Shockley
Landmarks Preservation Commission Staff

Report typed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females, Constitution and First and Second Annual Reports (New York: J. Seymour, 1815).
2. Rev. J.F. Richmond, New York and Its Institutions 1609-1871 (New York: E.B. Treat, 1871), p. 423.
3. New York County Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, and Convenances, Liber 433, page 387.
4. Association, Fifty-Fifth Annual Report (New York: Robert Malcolm, 1868), pp. 5-6.
5. The drawings are in the Richard Morris Hunt Collection, American Institute of Architects Foundation, Washington, D.C.
6. Association, Fifty-Eighth Annual Report. (New York: Robert Malcolm, 1871).
7. Association, Sixty-Eighth Annual Report (New York: Martin Roberts, 1881), p. 4. The Association had begun selling off its east side land in 1870, but much of it reverted to the Association in 1878 as the result of a mortgage default. Title to the Fourth Avenue block frontage between 78th and 79th Streets was transferred back to the Association in 1880 and 1881 (Liber Deeds 1567, page 205; Liber 1575, page 172). The Association did not sell the land until 1883.
8. The site was purchased from "Charles H. Russell," either Charles Handy Russell, wealthy merchant and brother-in-law of Richard M. Hunt's wife, or, more likely, his son Charles Howland Russell, (Liber Deeds 1607, page 479). The Association's intention was to sell off unneeded lots.

9. Paul R. Baker, Richard Morris Hunt (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), p. 544. Hunt also designed two adjacent houses, according to Baker, now demolished.
10. Sixty-Eighth Annual Report, p. 5.
11. Drawings for the variations (although not the completed building) are located in the Richard Morris Hunt Collection.
12. New York Times, December 7, 1883, p. 3.
13. Ormonde de Kay, Jr., "Richard Morris Hunt," Three Centuries of Notable American Architects (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1981), p. 92.
14. Baker, p. 334.
15. A discussion of Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc may be found in: Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, "Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc: Englishness and Frenchness in the Appreciation of Gothic Architecture," Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc 1814-1879 (London: Architectural Design, 1980), pp. 48-53.
16. Francis R. Kowsky, The Architecture of Frederick Clarke Withers and the Progress of the Gothic Revival in America After 1850 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), p. 7.
17. Peter B. Wight, Inland Architect, 26 (August 1895), 4, quoted in: James F. O'Gorman, The Architecture of Frank Furness (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 25.
18. Paul E. Sprague, "Sullivan, Louis H.," MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects, Adolf K. Placzek, editor (New York: The Free Press, 1982), vol. 4, p. 157.
19. The Presbyterian Hospital was built on land, part of an inherited farm, donated by philanthropist James Lenox, who was a patron of Hunt. Baker (p. 298), apparently without substantiation, mentions a connection between Association Residence and Lenox. Neither the Fourth Avenue site nor the Amsterdam Avenue site were on Lenox-owned land.
20. Montgomery Schuyler, American Architecture and Other Writings, William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1961), vol. 2, p. 510.
21. The building description is partially based on: Association Residence Nursing Home - National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, prepared by Fred W. Chapman and Lynn A. Beebe, November 1974.
22. Association, Ninety-First Annual Report (New York: Roberts and Bokee, 1904).
23. Association, Ninety-Fourth Annual Report. (New York: Roberts and Bokee, 1907).
24. Ibid.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Association Residence for Respectable Aged Indigent Females (Association Residence for Women) 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 Association Residence is one of the few surviving structures in New York City by Richard Morris Hunt, one of the nation's foremost nineteenth-century architects, who made significant architectural contributions to the city; that it is an exceptional surviving example of Hunt's institutional architecture in a French-inspired style which recalls Victorian Gothic; that among its major features are the mansard roof, projecting pavilions, corner towers, gables, dormers and polychromy; that the addition of 1907-08 by Charles A. Rich duplicated Hunt's distinctive design; that the building long housed one of New York City's oldest charitable institutions; that it is a prominent feature of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood of Manhattan's Upper West Side.

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 Association Residence for Respectable Aged Indigent Females (Association Residence for Women), 891 Amsterdam Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1855, Lot 50, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females. Annual Reports. New York, 1815-1914.
- Baker, Paul R. Richard Morris Hunt. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980.
- Buckhurst Fish Hutton Katz. Association Nursing Home: Feasibility Study for Reuse. New York: Buckhurst Fish Hutton Katz, 1981.
- Hunt, Richard M. Architectural Drawings for the Association Residence. Variations for Project, 1868 and 1881. Richard Morris Hunt Collection. American Institute of Architects Foundation. Washington, D.C.
- Kay, Ormonde de, Jr. "Richard Morris Hunt." Three Centuries of Notable American Architects. Joseph J. Thorndike, Jr., editor. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1981.
- King, Moses. King's Handbook of New York City. Boston: Moses King. 1892.
- National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form - Association Residence Nursing Home. Prepared by Fred W. Chapman and Lynn A. Beebe. November 1974.

New York City. Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Alterations Dockets. Alt. 1880-1907.

New York County. Office of the Register. Liber Deeds and Conveyances. Liber 443, page 387; Liber 1567, page 205; Liber 1575, page 172; Liber 1607, page 479.

New York Times, December 7, 1883, p. 3.

Richmond, Rev. J.F. New York and Its Institutions 1609-1871. New York: E.B. Treat, 1871.

Schuyler, Montgomery. American Architecture and Other Writings. vol. 2., Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 1961.

Sprague, Paul E. "Sullivan, Louis H.," MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects. Adolf K. Placzek, editor. vol. 4. New York: The Free Press, 1982.

Whiffen, Marcus, and Koeper, Frederick. American Architecture 1607-1976. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981.

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie R. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1970.



Association Residence
891 Amsterdam Avenue
Manhattan

Architect: Richard M. Hunt
Built: 1881-83



Association Residence
891 Amsterdam Avenue
Manhattan

Architect: Richard M. Hunt
Built: 1881-83