

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 18, 1986; Designation List 184
LP-1416

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING, first floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance corridor, elevator lobby, East 45th Street inner vestibule, and East 45th Street entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, revolving doors, transoms, friezes, murals, chandeliers, light fixtures, vent grilles, mailbox and mail chute, and directory boards; 551 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1926-27; architects: H. Douglas Ives and Sloan & Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1281, Lot 1.

On January 11, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Fred F. French Building, first floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance corridor, elevator lobby, East 45th Street inner vestibule, and East 45th Street entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, revolving doors, transoms, friezes, murals and chandeliers, light fixtures, vent grilles, mailbox and mail chute, and directory boards, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to February 8, 1983 (Item No. 6). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission has received several letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation. One letter was written in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Located on the northeast corner of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue, the Fred F. French Building was constructed in 1926-27 as corporate headquarters for the prominent real estate firm of the same name. A proto-Art Deco design, with strong Near Eastern influences, it represents the stylistic compromise between lingering historicism and the modernistic trends that typified the architecture of the late 1920s. The Near Eastern allusion is enhanced in the vaulted lobby and enclosed vestibule on 45th Street by polychromatic ceiling ornament, decorative cornices of ancient inspiration, elaborate wall fixtures and, most splendidly, by the twenty-five gilt-bronze doors where inset panels of women and bearded Mesopotamian genii symbolize various aspects of commerce and industry. The lavish marble walls and floor, together with the eight architect-designed crystal chandeliers and even the griffon-framed mailbox distinguished the Fred F. French Building as an exotic "business palace" among more straightforward office buildings. It was, upon completion in 1927, one of the most popular addresses in the midtown commercial zone.

The Fred F. French Building is a significant example of distinctive corporate imagery dating from the era of New York's greatest building boom. Financed by the first commercial application of Fred French's cooperative investment plan, the building was broadly applauded for its ornament, technological advances and unusually accomplished planning. Among its other amenities were close proximity to Grand Central Terminal and a prime location in the rapidly developing business district at midtown Fifth Avenue. The public areas of the French Building's first floor interior remain substantially intact. The only significant modification was enclosure of the entrance vestibule on 45th Street with modern glass doors and transom -- a measure which, in effect, has increased the interior space. Admirably maintained, the first floor lobby and vestibules of the Fred F. French Building survive as one of the finest examples in New York of architectural exoticism from the late 1920s.

Development of the Midtown Business Center

The mid- and late 1920's witnessed an unprecedented building boom in midtown Manhattan. Indeed, construction along Fifth Avenue was so active that it was hailed as "the seventh wonder of twentieth-century commerce."¹ Growing apace were the Grand Central Zone immediately to the east and the Garment Center on the west, the latter located between 30th and 40th Streets, off Sixth Avenue. Broadway theater construction was simultaneously proceeding at break-neck speed, adding some forty-five playhouses to the area around Times Square in the first two decades of the century alone. By 1930 the total had surpassed eighty.² A major thoroughfare through the theater zone is Sixth Avenue which was forecast in the late 1920s as Manhattan's new commercial frontier. Expectations for its revival were encouraged by plans for the imminent demolition of the Sixth Avenue El (which, however, did not occur until 1940). Sixth Avenue thus held great interest for New York's major real estate developers, not the least of whom was Fred F. French.³

Concurrent building activity in eastern midtown was propelled by Warren & Wetmore's Grand Central Terminal (completed in 1913), the focus of east side commuter traffic. It played a pivotal role in developing the area, ranking "second only to Wall Street."⁴ The surrounding region was owned by the New York Central Railroad which improved its properties through a coordinated policy for the erection of tall office buildings and hotels. Removal of the 42nd Street spur of the Third Avenue Railway also encouraged growth, leaving the street ripe for commercial development and reclamation by pedestrians and vehicular traffic.⁵ The area around 42nd Street thus became a busy link between the Grand Central Zone on the east, Times Square and the booming west side.

Perhaps most spectacular was the development of Fifth Avenue, and particularly its midtown section. On the occasion of the Avenue's centennial in 1924, the Fifth Avenue Association published Fifth Avenue: Old and New in which the two preceding years (1922-24) were cited as the peak of building activity.⁶ Subsequent construction, however, proved even greater in scope. The fifteen office buildings constructed in 1925 were "not matched in any year after World War II until 1957. The thirty office buildings constructed in 1926 have not been matched since."⁷ The Fred F.

French Building was among that record-breaking thirty.

The proliferation of new buildings was fostered by such civic improvements as street widening and repair (widening operations of Fifth Avenue were first undertaken in 1907, and completed in 1929). Also influential was the strict enforcement of zoning regulations, and other laws affecting realty and business.⁸ Statistics indicate that Fifth Avenue frontage represented only 8% (one and a half square miles) of Manhattan's total area, yet in 1926 it comprised 25% of total building investments. Earlier in the century, 45th Street was seen as the northernmost boundary for sound building ventures. However, by 1923 quality construction had already appeared on 46th Street, and in the following years continued its northward progression along both sides of Fifth Avenue.⁹

One of the independent (non-New York Central Railroad) pioneers in the commercial revitalization of the area was real estate developer Fred F. French. By March of 1925 he had purchased land on the northeast corner of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue. At the time the properties were occupied by an office building, four dwellings and the Church of the Heavenly Rest, all of which were razed to accommodate the Fred F. French Company's corporate headquarters.¹⁰ The midtown location of the new building was at once boldly calculating and touchingly sentimental: one of the first jobs French had ever held was next to this site as a near-destitute timekeeper at the exclusive Home Club (11 East 45th Street). French never forgot his humble beginnings.

Balancing the romantic was Fred French the astute businessman. In 1859, the corner lots on Fifth Avenue and 45th Street had been estimated at \$2.80 per square foot. By the time French bought them some 65 years later their value had centupled. Nonetheless, the \$250-\$285 per square foot price that French paid for the 19,000 square foot site was a bargain when similar choice properties were being sold for \$300 per square foot or more.¹¹ French Company stockholders congratulated themselves on "one of the shrewdest real estate purchases on Manhattan Island during the last decade."¹²

FRED F. FRENCH

Fred Fillmore French was born on October 14, 1883 at East 86th Street in Manhattan, but subsequently moved with his family to East 162nd Street in the Bronx. His mother was a college graduate and a niece of United States president Millard Fillmore (in honor of whom Fred French received his middle name). French's father, by contrast, was an impoverished cigar maker. He died when French was a child, leaving the boy (the eldest of four children) to help support his family with a variety of part-time jobs.



Upon completion of elementary school, French won the Pulitzer Scholarship to the Horace Mann High School and then attended Princeton for a year, before heading to Mexico "for a taste of ranching."¹³ When French returned to New York in 1905, he became interested in building, and enrolled in an engineering course at Columbia University. He was variously employed as a general utility man, a gang foreman on a reservoir project in White Plains, New York, as a building superintendant and most memorably, as timekeeper near the site of his future corporate headquarters. By the time French was forty, he had hired his former teacher from Columbia and many of his early employers to work as vice-presidents in his expanding real estate and building empire.

Fred F. French formed his namesake company in 1910 when he was 27. As president, he drew a \$15 weekly salary, with one small boy as his workforce. Beginning as a humble contractor in the basement of his Bronx home, French soon purchased the property (his first acquisition) and proved himself a financial genius. Despite betrayal by his first partner (a former Alaskan missionary) French recovered, and within a decade of his company's founding arranged for a \$250,000 loan. He used the money to construct a 16-story office building on the northwest corner of 41st Street and Madison Avenue, several floors of which French occupied upon its completion in March, 1920.¹⁴ Barely five years later, he purchased the 45th Street site for new corporate headquarters. Vastly larger than the previous building, more costly and lavish by far, it amply testified to his meteoric rise. Less than fifteen years after establishing his company, French had become one of the foremost developers in New York. His "one and a half-man business" had swelled into a multifaceted (and ultimately international) operation which was staffed by hundreds of employees. When the French Building opened in 1927 the total value of the French Company's activities amounted to no less than \$90,000,000.¹⁵

At the core of this stunning success was the "French Plan" which Fred French created in 1921. An innovative form of co-investment by the French Company and its tenants/owners, the Plan was based on "making a small profit on a large business as opposed to large profits on a small business."¹⁶ French explained the concept as follows:

It is our belief that the people whose money helped to make such building enterprises possible should receive in addition to safety, a fair share of the profits earned. Accordingly, it was decided that the entire net profits from the operation of a building should be devoted towards repaying the investors, together with 6% cumulative dividends, before any distribution of such profits could be made to the Fred F. French Companies. Thereafter, by equal division of the common stock, the public receives half the profits in perpetuity.¹⁷

Unlike the more common cooperative investment plans, the French Plan turned over land to its investors at actual cost without padding construction or real estate expenses.

Crucial to the success of the French Plan was the comprehensive organization of French's multiple real estate and building concerns, all of which gradually developed into individual companies. Each handled a

different aspect of French's enterprises, but unity was maintained under one president, head architect, builder, owner, contractor and underwriter. According to The Plan, a site was acquired by the Fred F. French Investing Company, and the design and program laid out and supervised by the Fred F. French Company, Architects and Builders. The Fred F. French Investing Company underwrote and sold the stock for the new corporation (formed in each case for building ownership), and retained 50% of the stock for services in underwriting and promotion. Finally, upon completion of the building by the Fred F. French Construction Company, it was turned over to the Fred F. French Management Company.¹⁸

The Fred F. French Building on Fifth Avenue appears to have been the first commercial application of the French Plan. Prior to 1925-26 The Plan had been restricted to residential properties, including apartment houses at 15, 16, 17 and 55 Park Avenue, 34 East 51st Street, 247 West 75th Street, 22 West 77th and other buildings, including several on Fifth Avenue. Among the latter were apartment houses at numbers 1140 and 1160, and another at 1110 (the penthouse of which French occupied with his family).¹⁹ Also financed by the Plan were two vast East Side enterprises -- Tudor City and Knickerbocker Village -- and it was there that the financial wizardry of Fred French was best revealed.

His \$100,000,000 Tudor City started with the purchase of a five acre site on Prospect Hill in December, 1925. This seemingly undesirable area was located several blocks east of Grand Central Terminal, and was cluttered with tenements, slaughter houses and breweries. By 1930, however, French had transformed the site into an eminently successful residential development. The complex was desirable for the consciously domestic quality of its Tudoresque buildings, and highly attractive for its proximity to the midtown business district. Amid dense urban congestion, French had developed a quiet middle-class garden community from which thousands of tenants could walk to work. The achievement was unprecedented.

The success of Tudor City prompted French to grander visions. In 1928 he organized the \$50,000,000 Fred F. French Operators Inc. Straying from his previous policy of purchasing property specifically for building purposes, French determined to "buy and sell real estate either for quick turn [overs] or to hold for increase in value. The new company," he explained, "being ten times larger than the Fred French Investing Company... could... build ten Tudor Cities!"²⁰

French had planned various suburban developments for Westchester and elsewhere in New York, but actually undertook a second large scale complex in Manhattan. As at Tudor City, which was then (1928) under construction, French began Knickerbocker Village by assembling slum acreage (in this case, a "lung block," so named for the prevalence of tuberculosis). The new residential complex was initially designed for occupancy by Wall Street workers, but was modified by federal funding to include lower income housing. The development was located along the East River, several miles south of its Tudor predecessor. Original plans for Knickerbocker Village consisted of a sprawling forty acre site between the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. However, when construction ceased in 1934, barely 25% of the grand scheme had been realized.²¹

Although the Depression and other complications prevented Knickerbocker Village from equaling the immediate success of Tudor City, both ventures were remarkable as the largest land parcels ever assembled in Manhattan up until their time.²² The Fred F. French Building was conceived in 1925 within months of Tudor City's inception. It was completed in October of 1927, just prior to the assemblage of Knickerbocker Village. More than just a center of operations, French's new building on prestigious Fifth Avenue was to be a tangible monument to his success (as its multiple inscriptions and Fred French monograms amply attest). It figured prominently on the masthead of The Voice, the French Company's monthly publication, where the French Building served as the centerpiece of other structures by French.

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French was married, had four children and countless business contacts, yet he claimed to have few acquaintances.²³ His primary interest was his work. French devoted himself indefatigably to all facets of his business, including primary authorship for many articles in The Voice and even daily pep talks to his large staff. Each morning, precisely at nine o'clock, employees gathered in the auditorium of the French Building to hear the Gospel according to their president. He sometimes addressed specific corporate issues, but was more often concerned with attitude and the mentality of success. He encouraged his workers with evangelistic zeal to "get smiling into [their] systems." In a very personal interpretation of Christian belief, French commended Christ as "the best salesman of all time" and His life, the "best example of a [successful] sales" pitch.²⁴ He preached the Biblical proverb "Knock and it shall be opened unto you," which in this case became a motto for unflagging persistence and the refusal to accept "NO" for an answer.

French's absolute dedication continued until 1936 when he died unexpectedly at age 52. Since the completion of his corporate offices some nine years prior, French had occupied the building's twelfth and thirteenth floors (still partially occupied by the firm at this writing). In the months preceding his death French was working in these offices on new developments for Manhattan. Although details of the various schemes were not disclosed, some idea of their scope might be found in one of French's

unrealized projects. In December, 1929 he announced plans to construct an 83-story building on Sixth Avenue. At 1,100 feet, the skyscraper would have easily surpassed the Chrysler Building (1,046') which itself had recently eclipsed the Woolworth Building as the tallest in the world.²⁵

French was eulogized with fulsome praise for his foresight and skill in property assemblage, but his real genius was recognized as financial. One contemporary critic noted perceptively that French's success would have been impossible "without the vast resources attained through the French Plan."²⁶ The combination of both real estate and financial prowess had placed him among the greatest developers in New York. Yet despite this distinction, French himself technically owned no property. "All of his enterprises were registered under the names of corporations, each formed specifically for building ownership."²⁷

The Architects

Fred French's personal involvement in his business included basic architectural design (although the extent of his input has not been determined). Contemporaries recalled how he "dash[ed] up to the drafting room [to lay] out an apartment house or an office building. A plan," French claimed, "was the only fun he [got] out of life."²⁸ Under normal circumstances, the building was then worked up by staff architects under H. Douglas Ives. To the dismay of the architectural community, French did not employ outside designers. His new corporate headquarters, however, proved an exception. Intended as a potent architectural statement, corporate (and personal) advertisement, as well as a profitable investment, French strayed from his normal policy and engaged the firm of Sloan & Robertson as consulting architects. Clyde R. Place was employed as consulting engineer.²⁹

The division of labor among the various architects is unclear, but it appears likely that Sloan & Robertson had primary responsibility for the French Building's design. Although their partnership was only a year old when plans were filed in 1925, both men (aged 37 and 47 respectively) had distinguished themselves as skilled designers, particularly in the Grand Central Zone. In previous partnership with his father, Thomas Markoe Robertson (1878-1962) had amassed considerable experience in office building design while John Sloan (1888-1954) had recently gained prominence as the architect of the Pershing Square Building.

Sloan & Robertson's success as consulting architects of the French Building may have led to their commission for the Chanin Building. It was begun in 1927 when the French Building was still under construction,³⁰ and executed as the corporate headquarters for one of Fred French's major competitors. Significantly, Irwin S. Chanin, like French, deviated from his normal policy of in-house design to commission Sloan & Robertson. They erected for him a 57-story Art Deco building on 42nd Street (just three blocks south of the French Building -- and surpassing it by nineteen floors). In spite of their differences, the two structures were similar in that each was a brick tower atop a pyramidal base with bronze framed shopfronts, decorative bronze fascia and terra cotta ornament. A related commission was the neighboring thirty-story Graybar Building on 42nd

Street.³¹ Completed in 1927, it offered a million square feet of space, making it the largest (but not the tallest) office building in the world. Like the French Building, the Graybar has an eclectic ornamental scheme with strong Near Eastern influence. And like the Chanin, it was executed for one of French's rivals, in this case, Todd, Robertson & Todd. In what was by now a pattern, the firm engaged Sloan & Robertson over design by its own staff architects. As a result of their success at the Graybar and other modern office buildings (most notably the Cunard), Todd, Robertson & Todd won the privileged role in 1928 as developers of Rockefeller Center.

H. Douglas Ives, by contrast, most likely supervised construction in addition to making valuable contributions regarding the French Company's requirements. A skilled designer in his own right, he had been head architect of the French Company for approximately one year and was doubtless in close contact with its president. Ives later repeated the general setback massing of the French Building in the Hotel Tudor which he built in 1930-32 as the twelfth unit of Tudor City.

H. Douglas Ives

H. Douglas Ives was born in Montreal, Canada in 1888.³² He received his architectural education and practiced in Toronto until 1914, when he served in Europe with the Canadian military forces. After World War I, Ives relocated to New York. He was employed for a period by Cass Gilbert, but subsequently established an independent practice. By 1924-25 (when Ives was first listed in the New York City directory), he had already joined the Fred F. French Company. He served as its chief designer for ten years, executing not only the French Building, but also the Hotel Everglades in Miami, and most of the buildings in Tudor City, as well as other apartment and commercial buildings for French. In addition, Ives worked for French's concerns in London. A member of the Architectural League of New York, Ives was associated in 1944 with T.E. Rhoades, a local building contractor and engineer. Their brief collaboration terminated with Ives' death in the following year (1945).

Sloan & Robertson

Born in New York in 1888 and professionally trained at New York University, John Sloan went into business for himself in 1905, at age 21.³³ Three years later, he moved to the Philippine Islands as Architect and Superintendent of Construction for the War Department. During World War I Sloan did construction work for the American Expeditionary Force in France, and also served as a member of the Army Air Service Advisory Board in Washington. He returned to private practice in 1920 when he became associated with York & Sawyer on the design of the Pershing Square Building. The new structure was located at 100 East 42nd Street on the southeast corner of Park Avenue, just one block north of French's first corporate headquarters at 41st and Madison Avenue. The Pershing Square Building received a good deal of attention, particularly for its tone-varied brick and terra cotta ornament,³⁴ an aesthetic which Sloan quickly repeated at an apartment house at 898 Park Avenue (1923). Sloan leased space in the Pershing Square Building in 1923, and in the following year

opened an office there with his new partner, Thomas Markoe Robertson.

Robertson was born in 1878 to the eminent late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architect, Robert H. Robertson.³⁵ He graduated from Yale in 1901 and subsequently trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Father and son formed a partnership (R.H. Robertson & Son) in 1908 and practiced together until the former died in 1919. Thereafter Thomas Markoe Robertson collaborated with noted theater architect Henry B. Herts on plans for a Victory Memorial entertainment and sports complex.³⁶ An ambitious Beaux-Arts project, it was designed to complement Grand Central Terminal which it was to face on the south (on the entire block between 41st and 42nd Streets, Park and Lexington Avenues). The venture ultimately collapsed under economic pressures and, several years later, John Sloan erected the Pershing Square Building on the proposed Victory Memorial site.

During Sloan & Robertson's extended association, Sloan was responsible for the engineering and financial promotion of the firm's work. Specializing in institutional and commercial buildings, most frequently of Art Deco design, the firm's most notable commissions included the \$30,000,000 Wards Island Sewerage Disposal Plant, Rikers Island Penitentiary, and the East Terminus at Montauk, Long Island. In Manhattan, they executed the Maritime Exchange Building at 80 Broad Street, an office building at 29 Broadway, the Plaza Building at 625 Madison Avenue, the Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village (demolished) and apartment houses at 1 Beekman Place and 895 Park Avenue, as well as the annex to the St. Regis Hotel. Sloan had also designed the West Side Highway (1930) between Canal and 72nd Streets (partially demolished). The works which established Sloan & Robertson as leading skyscraper designers, however, were the Chanin and Graybar buildings both of which were prefigured by the French Building.

The Fred F. French Building

Plans for the Fred F. French Building were filed on August 25, 1925.³⁷ Work began nine months later (May 22, 1926) and on October 24, 1927, the structure was completed (a half year behind schedule).³⁸ From the beginning, the French Building was praised as "one of the most notable achievements in architectural design...as well as an excellent example of the extensive use of electricity in large buildings." Technologically innovative, it was equipped with such modern devices as an electric plumbing system with variable speed motors, conveniently controlled lighting and ventilation, and most notably, an automatic, self-levelling elevator system which "approach[ed] perfection as nearly as anything [could]."³⁹ Beyond its technological efficiency, the French Building was prized for its prime location and planning excellence; it was commended by the Building Planning Service of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers for "the most complete" plans it had ever seen.⁴⁰ The building was highly regarded in other sectors as well. A lengthy roster of prestigious tenants proved that to the businessman, merchant and consumer, the French Building was "one of the most popular business palaces in the entire midtown section."⁴¹ Its celebrity was due in no small degree to its lavish appointments.

Office buildings in the mid-nineteenth century had drawn on residential architecture, adapting and inflating the Renaissance palazzo into more grandly scaled commercial palaces. Thus steeped in the domestic imagery of cultivated gentlemen, the palazzo became a potent architectural symbol of the merchant prince.⁴² By the late nineteenth century, however, and progressively more so in the twentieth, the role of commerce was repositioned unabashedly, and without pretense of philanthropy, at the center of modern society. Traditional business virtues of thrift and prudence were replaced by corporate daring and assertiveness. Architecturally, the change was reflected in the abandonment of residential imagery for lofty, more impersonal building masses which were more suitable to the growing needs of increasingly confident capitalism.

The essence of the modern skyscraper was well established by the late 1920s, but the question of appropriate cladding remained unresolved. Articulation of tall buildings with classical detail had found early favor among architects, but was subsequently discouraged by the Building Code of 1916. Prohibiting projections of more than 18 inches from a facade, this legislation effectively weaned architects from boldly protruding cornices and free-standing sculpture. Popular alternatives were found in the Gothic and Romanesque styles, both of which were considered for use in the French Building.⁴³ In fact, French's own office at 551 Fifth Avenue was executed in the Tudor style⁴⁴ (complementing the broad medievalism of his contemporaneous residential complex at Tudor City). In the end, however, Ives and Sloan & Robertson decided on a Near Eastern aesthetic for the French Building. Its stepped masses and ornamental tiles in low relief were admirably suited to the requirements of the new building ordinance.

The selection of the French Building's style was primarily an exterior consideration, yet great attention was paid to its continuation -- indeed, elaboration -- in the public areas of the first floor interior. According to the French Company's Voice, the lobby of an office building was "suggestive of the cleanliness, willingness, capability and fairmindedness of the management."⁴⁵ In short, it was an advertisement for the owner -- an aspect emphasized at the French Building by the multiple decorative monograms of its namesake founder. With its lavish gilt-bronze ornament, polychromatic vault decorations and gleaming marble walls, the lobby of the French Building lent itself easily to description as a "commercial palace." It is embellished throughout with a wide array of not only Near Eastern motifs, but also classical and incipient Art Deco flourishes. Decoration, not archaeological veracity, was the architects' primary aim. Ives and Sloan & Robertson made no attempt at historical accuracy.

45th Street Entrance Although the French Building is situated on Fifth Avenue (from which it takes its primary address), the major building entrance was actually located on 45th Street where the site's great length permitted a short, but wide, marble vestibule.⁴⁶ Enclosed by a modern transparent glass screen (installed behind the building's outer entrance arch), the vestibule leads directly into the lobby through the single leaf-door and two revolving doors of an elaborate gilt-bronze frontal. Its jambs and lintels are relieved by a wealth of Near Eastern motifs ranging from ox head protome capitals atop bundled shafts to winged horses and lush Mesopotamian flora. Above the castellated door housing, and connecting it to the vestibule's polychromed vault, is a multi-pane gilt bronze transom.

Fifth Avenue Entrance & Corridor A similar, although abbreviated, frontal and transom appear in the recessed entrance on Fifth Avenue. But here the central, single-leaf door was omitted, and the two revolving doors were flanked by glazed shops (in lieu of marble walls): prime Fifth Avenue frontage was reserved for high income rental space. As a result, entry from this facade requires passage down a corridor which is slightly narrower, but considerably longer, than that on 45th Street. The corridor is segmented into bays by pilasters with bronze spear inserts and crowned, above a gilded plaster frieze, by a polychromed vault with animated mythological beasts and stenciled geometric patterns. The corridor's pronounced rake was an expedient solution to the different grade levels of higher Fifth Avenue and gently-sloped 45th Street, but it also served to draw businessmen and other visitors more quickly, almost irresistibly, into the elevator hall.

Elevator Lobby The lobby glistens in a dazzling concentration of bronze ornament. Nothing, it seems, escaped an exotic flourish. All three of the building's directory boards were framed by bronze pilasters and crowned by a floral and castellated frieze. A pair of bronze doors at the eastern end of the lobby was surrounded by embossed rosettes and even the double-chute mailbox received the greatest artistic attention. Framed and castellated like the building's entrances and directories, this pendant wall fixture dramatizes the Post Office insignia atop a pair of dorsal winged griffons. Each suspends from its beak an embossed medallion: that on the left cleverly incorporates the mailbox lock; that on the right, the pervasive monogram of Fred F. French. By positioning the mailbox between two elevator banks on the wall opposite the 45th Street vestibule, this utilitarian feature was made a central attraction in the well-traveled lobby.

Gilt-bronze Doors Vying for attention, and more powerful by sheer number, are the closely situated gilt-bronze doors which enclose each of the lobby's ten elevators as well as five additional entrances to an office and stairwells. The elevator doors are standard double leaf; the other doors duplicate their configuration but are actually side-hinged single leaves. In each case, the paired door panels have eight deep reveals in which variously posed figures (partially draped women and bearded Assyrian genii) symbolize Industry, Commerce, Finance and Building, i.e. the sundry business concerns of Fred F. French. There are also three more simple gilt-bronze doors in the lobby, their central glazing surrounded by rosettes.

Chandeliers The impact of so much gilt-bronze against lustrous, gray and honey-colored marble walls is both resplendant and alluring, all threat of meretriciousness having been diffused by the soft illumination of the lobby's eight chandeliers. Each fixture consists of a bronze foliate shell from which a dozen etched-crystal fins project. Specially designed by the architects to be shadowless,⁴⁶ they cast a dreamy halo of faceted light on the polychromed vaults above. In addition to their primary role of illumination, these splendid fixtures also serve as elevator directories: inscriptions "FLOORS//1 TO 16" and "FLOORS//17 TO 38" were cleverly incised (twice) into the lower rims of the appropriate chandeliers.

Because of its pronounced Near Eastern influence the French Building has been called New York's only Mesopotamian skyscraper.⁴⁷ But rather than comprising a distinct architectural style, its exotic allusions are better seen as part of the multiple forces at work in architectural design of the late 1920s. Interest in Egypt and the Near East (heightened in 1922 by Howard Carter's momentous discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb) coincided with inspiration from France, Vienna, contemporary films, the new machine aesthetic and other sources, including Mayan civilization. Theorists and architects alike recognized the similarities wrought by the Building Code with MesoAmerican and Near Eastern tombs and temples. Harvey Corbett, for instance, predicted that American cities would someday resemble a vast collection of Egyptian pyramids,⁴⁸ while others recommended the stepped prototypes for their logical geometric form⁴⁹ and effective polychromatic ornament.⁵⁰ The latter aspect was especially advanced by Ely Jacques Kahn in such buildings as the Furniture Exchange (1926) at 206 Lexington Avenue and most conspicuously, in the 2 Park Avenue Building which was completed just one month after the French Building (November 1927).⁵¹ Similar exotic influences appeared in New York, for example, in the decoration of the Chrysler Building (1929-30), in several contemporaneous apartment houses by Schwarz & Gross and more subtly, in the Egyptianizing aspects of Rockefeller Center where buildings were further enriched by the modern corporate equivalent of Babylon's rooftop gardens.

DESCRIPTION

The public area of the first floor interior is configured like an irregular L: a long corridor leading east from Fifth Avenue into the elevator lobby from which projects an enclosed vestibule south to 45th Street. The walls are faced in gray golden-veined St. Genevieve marble. They are lined by a plaster frieze (lotus and anthemion between an upper and lower rosette course) and a narrow lotus cornice. The frieze and cornice are gilded to match the lobby's numerous gilt-bronze fixtures, and are continuous in all public areas of the first floor interior. The only exception occurs in the fourth and fifth bays of the Fifth Avenue corridor which are covered by a low, flat ceiling (stenciled with geometric patterns). The rest of the interior is covered by a depressed banded barrel vault. Paired ribs protrude from the vault in the first three bays off Fifth Avenue, but are otherwise painted on the vault surface. A groin vault covers the intersection of the interior's north-south and east-west axes. The polychromed vault surfaces are ornamented and partially gilded with stenciled geometric patterns and various Mesopotamian beasts in low-relief. The floor is Italian travertine, inset with beige Kato stone diamonds and border, and a narrower border of Belgian black and white Dover marble triangles set between brass strips. For descriptions of the interior's chandeliers, mailbox, directory boards and doors see pages 10-11 above.

Leading east from the higher grade level of Fifth Avenue, the first three bays of the east-west corridor are raked, after which the floor levels off. The public areas of the ground floor interior are described below in an east to west progression.

Fifth Avenue Entrance The gilt-bronze entrance has two revolving doors, the glass lights of which are surrounded by embossed rosettes. The door jambs are faced with fluted and rosette-coursed pilasters, crowned by abstract floral capitals. Between the central door jambs is a brass panel with deep reveals but otherwise unornamented. A bronze lintel spans the entrance, ornamented above each revolving door with winged horses, birds and foliage. The frieze is topped by a row of floral dentils and a parapet of stepped castellations, each studded with a rosette. Set back, and rising above the cornice, is a transparent glass screen with decorative bronze muntins and colonnette-mullions. The lower lights are arranged in a tall arcade (with a single prominent muntin). The arcade is topped by a lunette of small, multi-pane windows that extend to the underside of the vault. On each side wall, above the bronze portal, is a large ornamental bronze grille.

1st Bay - Articulation on the north and south sides is identical.

- Marble base with decorative bronze grille
- Full-bay stationary transparent glass window with original bronze enframement
- Gilded frieze and cornice
- Chandelier in vault center
- Paired marble pilasters, their flutes emphasized by 3 applied bronze spears, and topped by a beveled, diaper-patterned capital.

2nd Bay - Articulation on the north and south sides is identical.

- Marble base with decorative bronze grille
- 2/3-bay stationary transparent glass window with original bronze enframement
- Original bronze-framed transom and door (atop 1 travertine step)
- Gilded frieze and cornice
- Chandelier in vault center
- Paired marble pilasters (described in "1st Bay," p. 12 above)

3rd Bay

NORTH SIDE

- Marble base (no grille)
- Full bay stationary transparent glass window with original bronze enframement
- Gilded frieze and cornice
- Chandelier in vault center
- Paired marble pilasters: 1) as described in "1st Bay," p. 12 above; 2) shorter pilaster with floral-topped bronze flutes and gilded capital
- Angle pilaster in eastern corner

SOUTH SIDE

- Marble base with bipartite bronze grille
- Gilt bronze directory board
- Paired pilasters (described in "1st Bay," p. 12 above)
- Angle pilaster in eastern corner

4th Bay - The 4th, like the 5th bay, is lower than the rest of the lobby and therefore has a marble wall overhang on the west. Its flat ceiling is stenciled with polychromatic ornament and illuminated by four decorative bronze fixtures, each with four long exposed bulbs.

WEST SIDE (visible from 3rd bay)

- 5 bronze rosettes as lower border
- Gilded frieze and cornice
- Polychromed lunette with lions and Assyrian warriors

NORTH SIDE

- Recessed original bronze-framed door flanked on the left by a large bronze-framed window and on the right, by a large framed window (with textured glass) and narrow vertical bronze screen
- no frieze or cornice

SOUTH SIDE

- Bronze-framed news stand with recessed roll down gate
- No cornice/frieze

5th Bay - Like the 4th bay, the 5th has a low, flat stenciled ceiling. In its center is a single light fixture (identical to those in the 4th bay)

NORTH SIDE

- 2 short pilasters (described above in "3rd Bay, North Side, type 2," p. 13 above)
- gilt-bronze paneled door (See p. 11)
- no cornice/frieze

SOUTH SIDE

- 1 gilt-bronze framed door with rosette enframement
- no cornice/frieze

EAST SIDE (visible from elevator lobby)

- 4 bronze rosettes as lower border
- Cornice/frieze
- Polychromed lunette with gilded bas-relief leaping beasts

Elevator Hall

- 3 chandeliers (see p. 11)

NORTH SIDE - The north side of the east-west corridor narrows to accommodate two elevator banks.

- Paneled double-leaf gilt-bronze doors to 6 elevators (see p. 11)
- Projecting bronze-framed illuminated elevator indicators
- Decorative bronze plaque indicating elevator number (above each elevator)
- Paneled single-leaf side-hinged gilt-bronze (office) door (see p. 11) with large bronze grille above
- Bronze plaque with embossed monogram of Fred F. French and foliate border
- Unornamented bronze call- and elevator control-box
- Double chute mailbox with groin vault above; on the north wall, below the vault, is a gilded diaper-patterned lunette

SOUTH SIDE

- 1 single-leaf side-hinged bronze framed door with rosette enframing
- Paneled double-leaf gilt-bronze doors to 4 elevators (see p. 11)
- Projecting bronze-framed illuminated elevator indicators
- Decorative bronze plaque indicating elevator number (above each elevator)
- 2 unornamented bronze elevator indicators

EAST SIDE

- 2 single-leaf side-hinged bronze-framed doors with rosette enframements
- Bronze floral lintel and plaque above
- Cornice/frieze
- Polychromed lunette with gilded bas-relief leaping beasts

Inner 45th Street Vestibule - Articulation on the east and west sides is identical.

- Large gilt-bronze directory board with bronze grille below
- Chandelier
- Paneled single-leaf side-hinged gilt-bronze door (deeply recessed) with bronze paneled inner jambs, bronze floral outer jambs and lintel; underlight in the recess has an exposed bulb with a floral bronze backshade
- Bronze wall grilles above portal

45th Street Bronze Portal - This portal is slightly larger, but otherwise substantially the same as that described in "Fifth Avenue Entrance" above. It differs in having 9 (instead of 7) arches in the transom and a side-hinged bronze-framed door between the two revolving doors. This central door (also with rosette enframing) is framed on either side by a bronze pilaster and coved inner jamb, the latter relieved by floral ornament.

Enclosed Vestibule, 45th Street

- Chandelier
- NORTH SIDE - Bronze portal: The obverse of the portal described above, it is differentiated by:
 - Central door framed by bundled shaft half columns with protome capitals, bronze paneled inner jambs (angled) and twisted rope colonettes
- SOUTH SIDE
 - 4 modern glass doors and tripartite glass transom with bronze mullions, muntin and frame
- WEST SIDE
 - Paneled single-leaf side-hinged gilt-bronze stairwell door (see p. 11)
 - Floral plaque above door
 - Cornice/frieze
- EAST SIDE
 - Door-sized recess partially pierced by bronze grille
 - Floral plaque above recess
 - Cornice/frieze

Conclusion

Built in 1926-27 during New York's greatest building boom, the lobby and first floor vestibules of the Fred F. French Building provide a significant example of distinctive corporate imagery and a monument to one of New York's greatest developers. The building was the personal enterprise of Fred French who, through his multi-faceted real estate and construction companies, oversaw every detail from property assemblage, to design, construction, financing, leasing and promotion. Although the adoption of Mesopotamian influences was primarily based on consideration for the building's exterior, a concerted effort was made to continue and elaborate the aesthetic in public areas of the first floor interior. The aim was achieved with lavish marble walls and patterned pavement, polychromed vaults with bronze and crystal chandeliers, sumptuous gilt-bronze doors and wall fixtures. The end result, highly polished and animated by floral and Near Eastern imagery, rendered the French Building one of the most sumptuous and exotic commercial palaces of its era. Substantially intact, the French Building remains one of the finest examples of the stylistic compromise between lingering historicism and vanguard modernism that characterized New York's architecture in the late 1920s.

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except on pp. 26-28 (from Carol Herselle
Krinsky, "The Fred F. French
Building: Mesopotamia in Manhattan,"
Antiques, 121 (January 1982), 286-91

NOTES

1. Henry Collins Brown, Fifth Avenue: Old and New (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Crawford Co., 1924), p. 101.
2. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, NJ: James T. White & Co., 1973), p. 198.
3. See p. 7 n. 25 below.
4. "Unique Low Building for Grand Central District," Real Estate Record and Guide, October 15, 1927, p. 9.
5. "Building Activity on Lexington Avenue," New York Times, March 4, 1928, sec. 12, p. 2.
6. Brown, p. 101.
7. Cervin Robinson and Rosemary Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 12.
8. "Steady Increase Shown in Real Estate Values," New York Times, July 25, 1926, sec. 10, p. 1.
9. Ibid. See also Brown, Fifth Avenue, p. 103.
10. Demolition Permit 227-25. See also "The French Companies Buy Big Plot on Fifth Avenue and 45th Street," New York Times, March 20, 1925, p. 34.
11. The \$250 per square foot price was quoted in "Two Fifth Avenue Corners Compared," The Voice, 2 (December, 1927), 1. The New York Times, however, recorded the higher price of \$285 per square foot ("The French Companies Buy Big Plot," Ibid.). French subsequently confirmed the latter price ("Real Estate Croakers," The Voice, 3 (July 1930), 3.
12. "Two Fifth Avenue Corners..."
13. Fred F. French. Obituary. New York Times, August 31, 1936, p. 15. For additional information on French see his obituary in the Real Estate Record and Guide, September 5, 1936, p. 1 and Robert M. Coates, "Profiles: Realtor [Fred F. French]," The New Yorker, June 1, 1929, p. 22-25.; "Romance in the Lives of City Builders," New York Times, February 24, 1929, sec. 12, p. 3; Murchison, "Architect Tolerates French and His Building," The Architect, 7 (January, 1927), 505, and articles throughout The Voice, the official organ of the Fred F. French Company (published 1926-30).
14. NB364-19. See also "New Home for the Fred F. French Company," New York Times, April 4, 1920, sec. 9, p. 2.

15. "The French Companies," New York Times, November 6, 1927, sec. 12, p. 1.
16. French. Obituary, [New York Times].
17. Ibid. See also "New Ownership Plan for Tenants," New York Times, March 15, 1923, p. 2.
18. Fred F. French. Obituary (Real Estate Record and Guide).
19. Coates, p. 22. See also Fred F. French, The French Plan (New York: Fred F. French Investing Co.), 1928 and "New Ownership Plan for Tenants," New York Times, April 15, 1923, p. 2.
20. "French Organizes \$50,000,000 Concern," New York Times, October 30, 1928, p. 52.
21. Fred F. French, "Knickerbocker Village," scrapbook in New York Public Library, 1933-34 [?]. See also Albert Mayer, "A Critique of Knickerbocker Village," Architecture, 71 (January, 1935), 5-10.
22. "First R.F.C. Housing Project," Architectural Forum, 58 (May, 1933) 435.
23. Murchison, p. 505.
24. Coates, p. 23.
25. "French Will Erect Sixth Avenue Skyscraper," Real Estate Record and Guide, December 21, 1929, p. 8. See also "City Rebuilding Needs Public Aid," New York Times, January 26, 1930, sec. 11, p. 2.
26. French. Obituary [Real Estate Record and Guide].
27. "Fred F. French Wrought Vast Changes in Manhattan's East Side Skyline," New York Times, September 6, 1936, sec. 9, p.1.
28. Murchison, p. 505.
29. "The French Building, New York City," Architecture and Building, 59, (October, 1927), p. 320, 347 and pls. 209-10.
30. Work on the Chanin Building began in 1927 and was completed on January 23, 1929. See the Chanin Building Designation Report, Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP-0993.
31. "Graybar Building," The Architect, 9 (November, 1927), 197-202.
32. H. Douglas Ives. Obituary. New York Times, August 15, 1945. See also Henry F. and Elsie R. Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970), p. 317.

33. John Sloan. Obituary. New York Times, June 26, 1954, p. 13. See also W. Parker Chase, New York, The Wonder City (New York: Wonder City Publishing Co., 1930), p. 113 and Sloan's obituary in the Michigan Society of Architects Monthly Bulletin, 28 (September, 1954), 15.
34. "Pershing Square Building," American Architect, 124 (October 10, 1923) 319-24.
35. Thomas Markoe Robertson. Obituary. New York Times, August 3, 1962, p. 23. See also "Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report" Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981, vol. 2, p. 1326-28, 1346-47.
36. Charles Over Cornelius, "War Memorials," Architectural Record, 47 (January 1920), 41-43.
37. NB518-25.
38. "\$10,000,000 French Project to be Ready March, 1927," Real Estate Record and Guide, July 17, 1926, p. 7.
39. "Confidence Justified," The Voice, 2 (January 1928), 4.
40. "Rapid Progress Made in Construction of 551 Fifth Avenue," The Voice, 1 (July, 1926), 1.
41. Chase, p. 245.
42. Lewis Mumford, The Brown Decades, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 139, 153. Cited by Kenneth Turney Gibbs, Business Architectural Imagery in America, 1870-1930 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 24. See also Gibbs for extended bibliography and further discussion of this concept.
43. H. Douglas Ives, "The Architecture of the French Building," The Voice, I (February 1927) p. 4.
44. Carol Herselle Krinsky, "The Fred F. French Building: Mesopotamia in Manhattan," Antiques, 121 (January 1982), 289-90, pls. IV-VI.
45. "Entering the French Building," The Voice, 3 (August 1928), 3.
46. A photograph of the 45th Street vestibule was identified as the "Main Entrance" in the preceding citation (Note 45). Information concerning building materials was drawn from the same source.
47. Krinsky, p. 291.
48. "Setback Buildings Growing in Favor," New York Times, June 24, 1923, sec. 2, p. 6.
49. See, for example, Rose Henderson, "A Primitive Basis for Modern Architecture," Architectural Record, 54 (August, 1923), 189-96 and Marjorie I. Ingle, The Mayan Revival: Art Deco Mayan Fantasy (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), esp. p. 51-56 and "The Origin of the Setback," American Architect, 131 (May 5, 1927), 605-8.

50. Parker Morse Hooper, "Modern Architectural Decoration," Architectural Forum, 63 (March 1928), 153-173.
51. NB499-26. See also Leon V. Solon, "The Park Avenue Building, New York City," Architectural Record, 63 (April, 1928), 289-97.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Fred F. French Building, first floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance corridor, elevator lobby, East 45th Street inner vestibule, and East 45th Street entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, revolving doors, transoms, friezes, murals, chandeliers, light fixtures, vent grilles, mailbox and mail chute, and directory boards, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Fred F. French Building was constructed as corporate headquarters for its namesake founder, one of New York's foremost real estate developers in the early decades of the twentieth century whose work had a lasting impact on New York's residential and commercial development; the Fred F. French Building, a collaborative design by H. Douglas Ives, the French Company's skilled head architect, and Sloan & Robertson, a firm responsible for some of the most distinguished Art Deco skyscrapers in New York, was an important and intentionally conspicuous example of corporate imagery; that the design represents the stylistic compromise between lingering historicism and the modernistic trends which typified the architecture of the late 1920s; that its interior continues the architectural historicism of the building's exterior, and is exceptional for the eclectic blend of Near Eastern, Egyptian, ancient Greek and proto-Art Deco influences; and that the lavish marble walls and floors, polychromatic vaults and gilt-bronze wall fixtures of the public areas of the first floor interior render the French Building among the finest commercial palaces of the late 1920s.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 an Interior Landmark The Fred F. French Building, first floor interior consisting of the Fifth Avenue entrance corridor, elevator lobby, East 45th Street inner vestibule, and East 45th Street entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, revolving doors, transoms, friezes, murals, chandeliers, light fixtures, vent grilles, mailbox and mail chute, and directory boards, 551 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1281, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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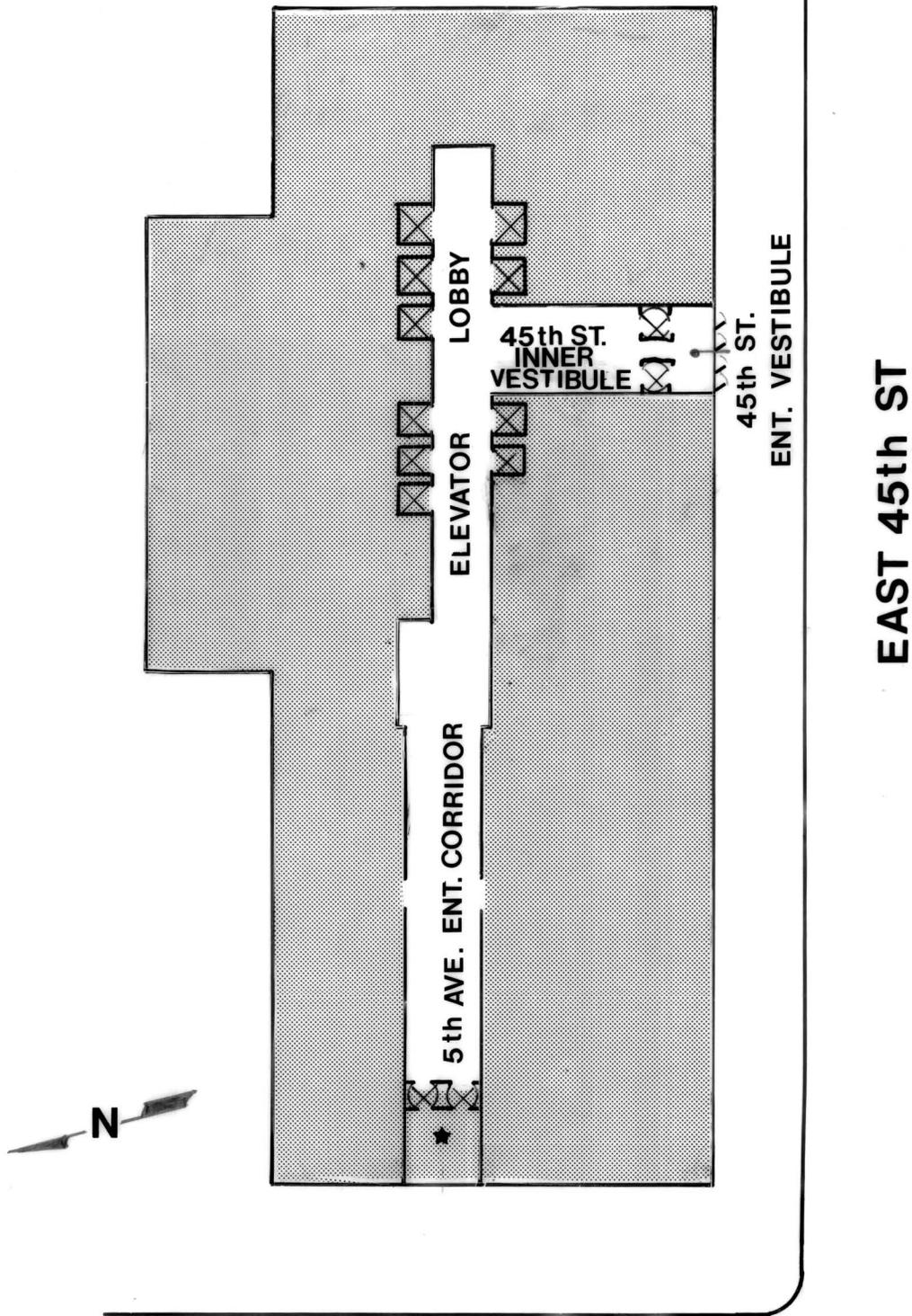
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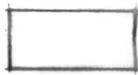
FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING GROUND FLOOR INTERIOR

551 FIFTH AVENUE



FIFTH AVENUE

KEY



Designated Area (Interior)

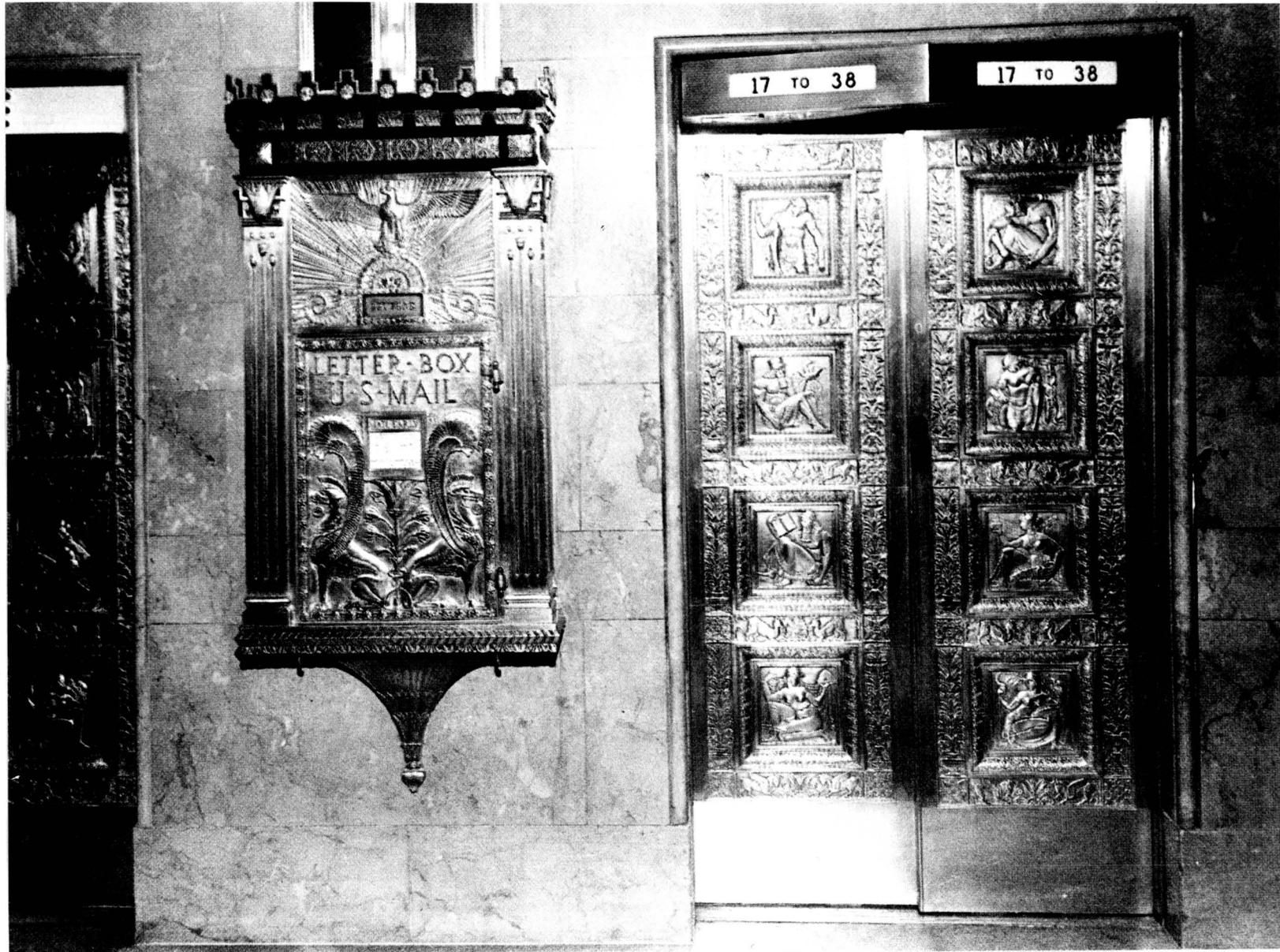


Undesignated Area (Interior)

* - Fifth Avenue Entrance Vestibule included in Exterior Designation

March 1st, 1986

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



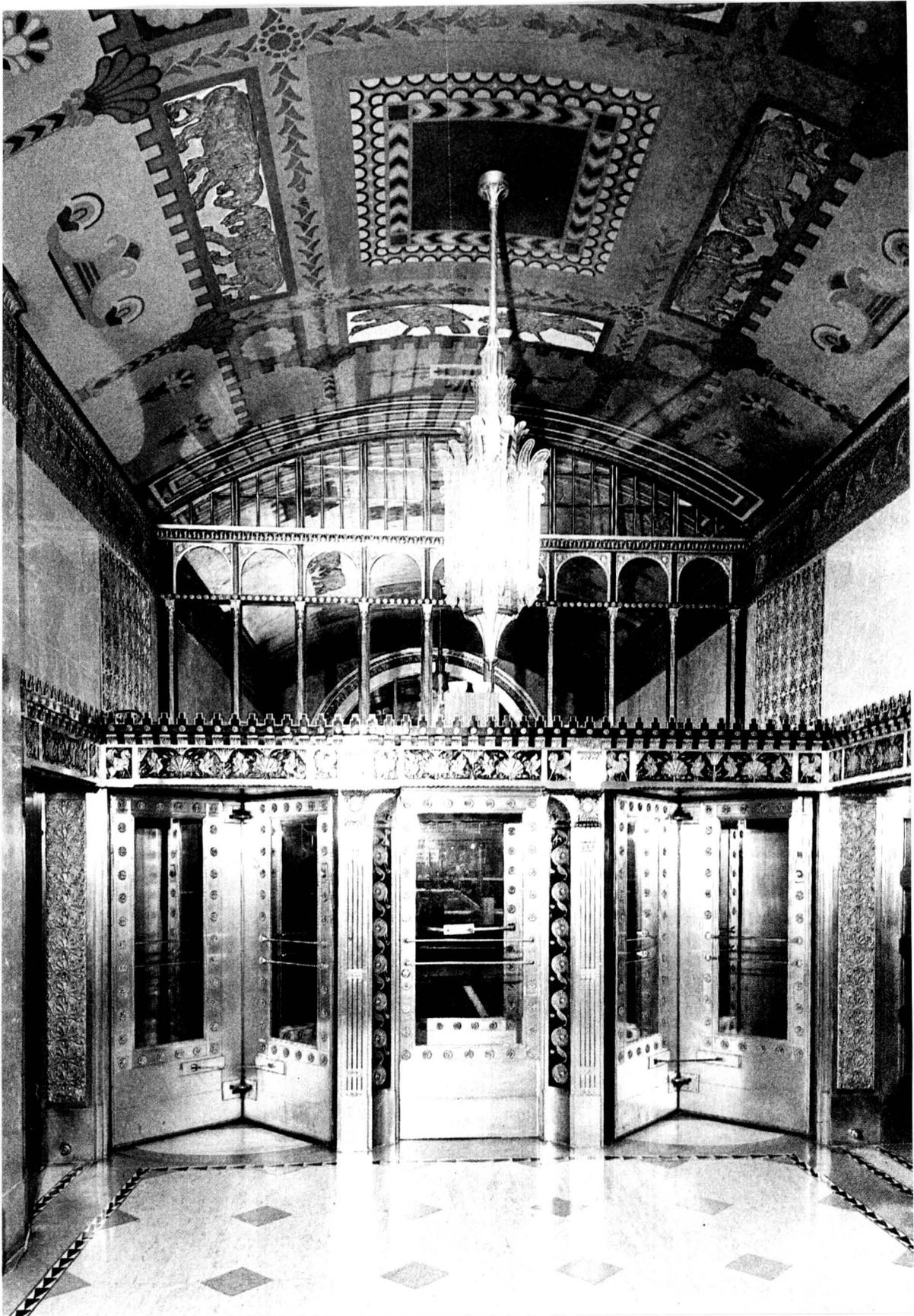
Detail: elevator lobby (north side) with gilt-bronze mailbox and elevator doors.

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING

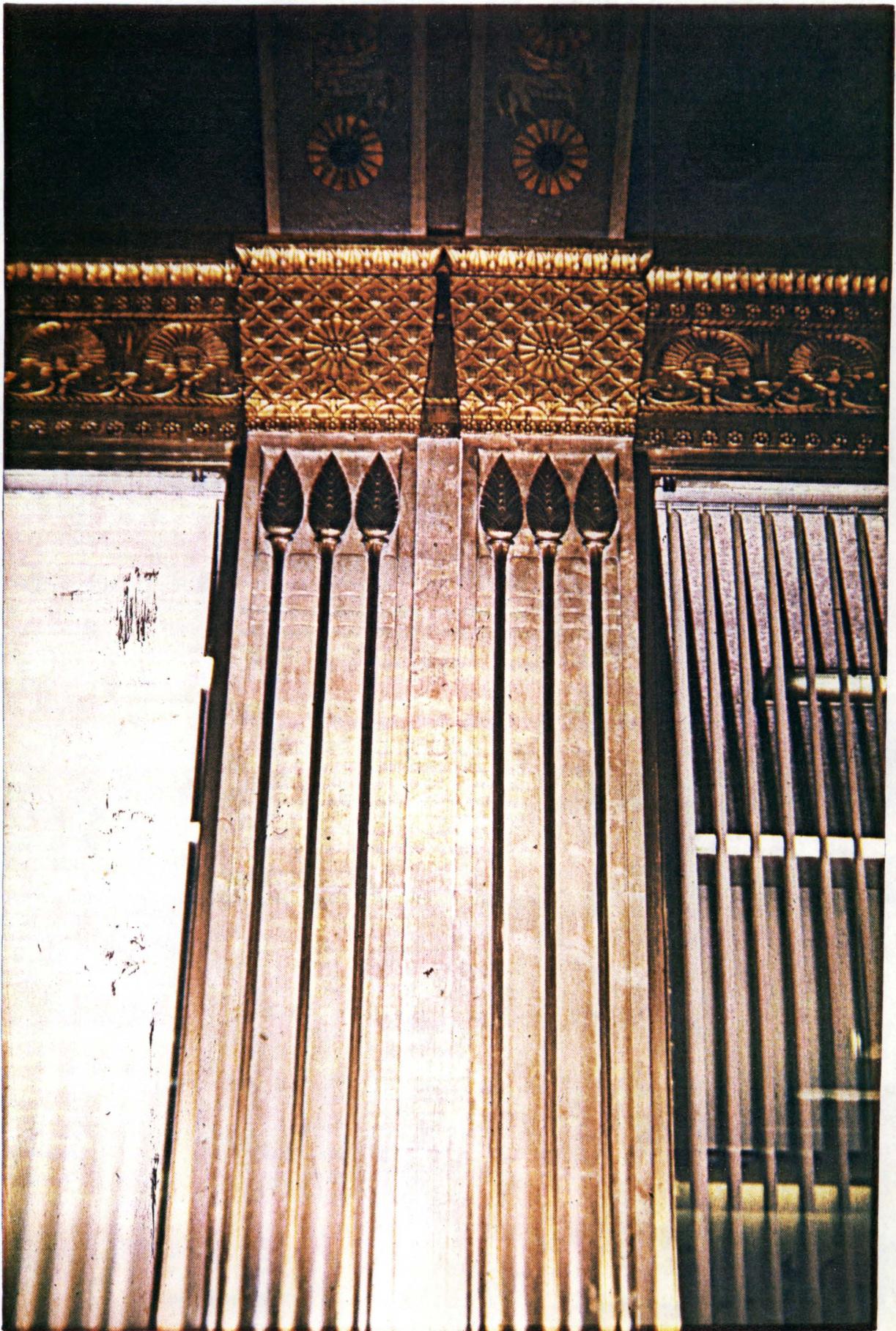


Detail: Fifth Avenue corridor, view to the southwest (toward Fifth Avenue).

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



Detail: 45th Street vestibule (view north).

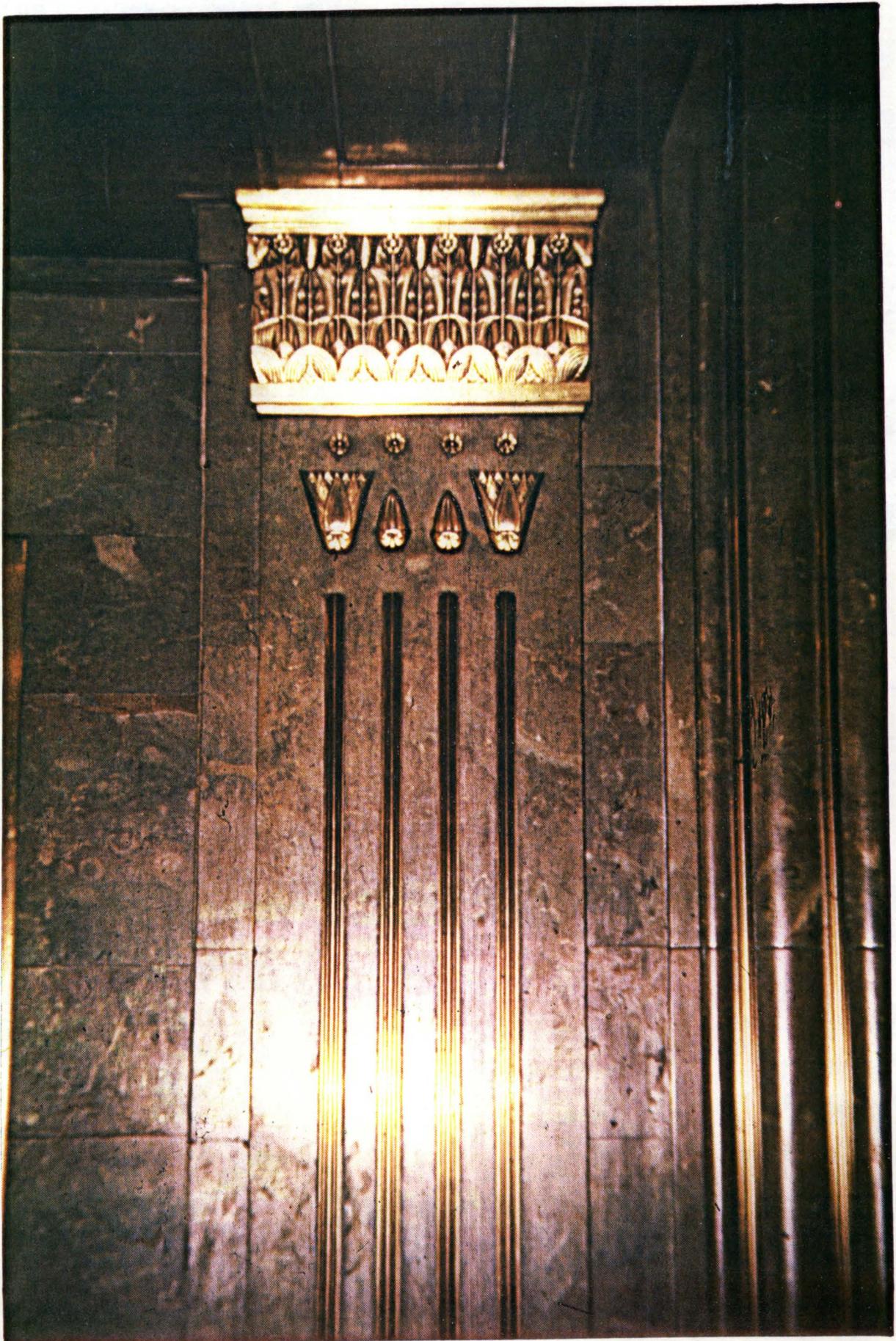


Detail: pilasters separating the 1st and 2nd bays of the Fifth Avenue corridor (south side).

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



Detail: one of eighth architect-designed bronze and etched glass chandeliers



Detail: pilaster in low-ceiling 4th bay (Fifth Avenue corridor, south side)



Detail: gilt-bronze double leaf service door