

ALHAMBRA APARTMENTS, 500-518 Nostrand Avenue a/k/a 29-33 Macon Street, Brooklyn. Built 1889-90; architect Montrose W. Morris.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1843, Lot 20.

On June 14, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Alhambra Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.6). The hearing was continued to September 13, 1983 (Item No.1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Alhambra Apartments in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant is one of Brooklyn's major apartment houses. Designed by Montrose W. Morris, it was built in 1889-90 by developer Louis F. Seitz¹ and was one of a number of commissions Morris executed for Seitz, including two other exceptional apartment buildings, the Renaissance and the Imperial. Although the ground floor was converted into storefronts in 1923,² the Alhambra is a distinguished design in a romantic combination of the Romanesque Revival and the Queen Anne styles.

Major development of Bedford-Stuyvesant took place in the mid to late 19th century when speculative builders and real estate developers transformed the rural community known as Bedford or Bedford Corners into an urban residential area of rowhouses for the middle and upper middle classes. In 1884, Henry Stiles, the noted historian of Kings County and the City of Brooklyn, wrote that Bedford had "lately and reluctantly yielded its charms to the rude embrace of city improvements" and had changed from "a simple forest-environed cluster of ancient, low-browed Dutch houses presenting a scene of quiet beauty."³ The hamlet of Bedford Corners can be traced back to 1663 and was located at the intersection of three important roads: the Brooklyn and Jamaica Turnpike, one of the oldest roads in Kings County which connected the Fulton Ferry with the towns of Jamaica and Hempstead; the Cripplebush Road which ran north to Newtown in Queens; and the Clove Road which extended south to Flatbush. The location of the hamlet is approximately the present intersection of Bedford Avenue and Fulton Street. Bedford was never recognized as a separate town and, with the establishment of Brooklyn as an independent city in 1834, it formed the city's Seventh and Ninth Wards.⁴

Urban development of the area began about the time of the Civil War

and was spurred by the extension of rapid transit facilities which provided easy access to downtown Brooklyn and the ferries to Manhattan. And, as the economy began to recover from the financial crash of 1873, groups of rowhouses began to fill the empty land throughout the section. Ten years later, the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge made Bedford even more attractive as a residential area, so that by the time the Alhambra was completed, there was a distinct urban character to the neighborhood.

Montrose W. Morris, the architect of the Alhambra, was born about 1861 in Hempstead, New York, and moved to Brooklyn while he was still a young boy. Educated in the public schools of Brooklyn and at the Peekskill Academy, he began his practice in 1883 with his own office on Exchange Place in lower Manhattan. He maintained his office in lower Manhattan until his death in 1916 when two of his sons who had been associated with the firm continued the practice.⁵

When Morris first opened his office, he employed an interesting advertising technique to promote his firm. On land he owned on Hancock Street between Marcy and Tompkins Avenues in Brooklyn, he designed and built his own residence and opened it to the public. It attracted many visitors and favorable notices in the press.⁶ One of the visitors impressed with Morris' work was Louis F. Seitz who commissioned him to design an apartment house for the property Seitz owned on Nostrand Avenue opposite the new Girls' High School. Known as the Alhambra, the new building so pleased Seitz that he soon commissioned Morris to design two other large apartment houses, the Renaissance and the Imperial. These three apartment buildings were among the most prestigious and most impressive multiple-family residences in Brooklyn.

Morris executed scores of residential commissions throughout Brooklyn, from some of the borough's most imposing mansions such as the Henry Carlton Hulbert mansion (1892) at 49 Prospect Park West and the Clarence Walker Seamens residence (1900-03) on St. Marks Avenue (now demolished), to groups of rowhouses such as those at 282-290 and 285-289 DeKalb Avenue, and 236-244 Hancock Street, to striking apartment houses such as the Alhambra, the Renaissance, the Imperial, the Montrose, and the Chaterlaine. Fortunately, most of Morris' work still stands in Brooklyn adding greatly to the borough's architectural heritage.⁷ Morris worked in the prevalent architectural styles of the period, beginning in the 1880s with the picturesque Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival with their highly articulated details and vibrant palette of materials, and shifting in the 1890s to the newly-popular classically-inspired styles with their more refined detail and lighter-toned materials. The Alhambra, an example of the early stylistic phase of Morris's work, is one of the earliest apartment houses to be built in Brooklyn that was designed for the middle-class. During the 19th century, the single-family rowhouse was the standard residential building type for the middle class. In fact, there was a distinct prejudice against living in a "flathouse." It was only toward the end of the century that it became socially acceptable to live in an apartment house. The high quality of the design and the richness of the materials of the Alhambra were an inducement calculated to attract middle-class families, as were the building's scale and mass which blends so harmoniously with its surrounding neighborhood of brick and brownstone rowhouses.

The front facade of the Alhambra faces Nostrand Avenue and encompasses the entire blockfront between Macon and Halsey Streets, directly opposite Girls' High School, a designated New York City Landmark. The building is actually divided in the center, creating two separate identical structures connected at each upper story by open columned bridges. (Some of the terra-cotta columns have been recently removed.) Before the ground floor was altered in 1923 creating a continuous block-long storefront, the central division was much more apparent, furnishing views to the interior courtyard. A further alteration at the time consisted of enlarging the entrances on Halsey and Macon Streets to compensate for the loss of those on Nostrand Avenue.

Built of Roman brick, stone, metal and terra cotta, each building rises four stories with a slate mansard fifth floor. At each corner of the two buildings is a polygonal tower. The central bay of each building projects slightly and is characterized by deeply recessed, square-headed loggias with Corinthian columns (some recently removed) at the second and third floors, and an arcaded loggia at the fourth. Above the foliate cornice, at the fifth or mansard story, the bay takes the form of a crowning gable with recessed loggia and embossed tympanum, originally with a terra-cotta human mask which has been removed. Flanking the loggias are square-headed windows with terra-cotta lintels at the second and third stories; brick, round-arched windows at the fourth; and diminutive windows within the gable. The projection of the central section is enhanced by stone quoins and, at the roof, by tall corbelled chimneys.

Between the central sections and the corner towers are shallow three-sided metal bays. At the second and third stories, the bays are vertically joined and crowned by an entablature; the floor division is marked by a multi-panelled spandrel. The bay at the fourth floor is enlivened by quoins and a flush foliate lintel. The fifth floor has projecting dormers with foliate-paneled pediments.

The corner towers are polygonal and rise from battered rough-faced stone bases. The ground floors of the towers on Halsey and Macon Streets still retain round-arched windows with brick voussoirs, and a guilloche band at impost level marks the transition from the stone base to the Roman brick upper floors. The three faces of each tower are pierced by square-headed windows with terra-cotta lintels at the second and third stories, and brick round-arched windows at the fourth. Each corner of the towers is emphasized with quoins. The fifth floor, or roof, of each tower is a slate-covered polygonal cone, each face of which is pierced by a dormer. Intersecting corbelled chimneys join the main roof.

The facades on Macon and Halsey Streets between the corner towers are symmetrically arranged. The first floor has paired round-arched windows with brick voussoirs and the round-arched columned entrances to the apartments. The original side entrances were located where the paired windows are now and other, adjoining paired windows were replaced by the present entrances. This rearrangement was due to the storefront conversion on Nostrand Avenue. The paired windows of the second and third floors are vertically joined by a keyed stone enframing set on a foliate corbel. The floor division is marked by handsome foliate panels and the crowning lintel entablatures are carried on corbels. The most dramatic features of these two facades are the fourth floor terra-cotta arcades with checkerboard

spandrels. Set well back behind the arcades, the face of the building is sheathed with fish-scale shingles. The slate-covered mansard fifth floors have two double-window dormers with foliate-paneled pediments.

Morris's use of brick patterns, arched windows, carved brackets, foliate bandcourses and quoins gives continuous movement to the facade, and the ingenious use of open loggias and arcades relieves the strong horizontal massing of the building, as does the upward movement of the towers. The subtle polychromatic effect created by the various materials contributes an essential element to the architectural success of the Alhambra. All of these elements combine to create a particularly effective and picturesque amalgam of the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles. Although alterations have been made to the building, the upper floors are vacant, and the stores are only partially occupied, the overall dignity and power of the Alhambra have not been totally compromised. It is still one of the most impressive buildings on Nostrand Avenue. In form, detail, and massing it remains an outstanding example of turn-of-the-century apartment house design.

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NOTES

1. Kings County, Office of the Register, Conveyances, Deeds, and Mortgages, Liber 1863, Page 228, 2/15/1889; Liber 1870, Page 304, 3/18/1889.
2. Ibid. Liber 4219, Page 274, 1/29/1923; Liber 4344, Page 4, 11/21/1923; Liber 4379, Page 310, 2/25/1924; Liber 4381, Page 180, 4/1/1924.
3. Henry R. Stiles, ed., History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York, Vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), p. 155.
4. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Brooklyn Survey: Bedford-Stuyvesant Proposed Historic District, (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1978), pp. 14-15.
5. Dennis Steadman Francis, Architects in Practice, New York, 1840-1900, (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), p. 56. Also, Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide, New York, April 22, 1916, Montrose Morris Obituary, p.634.
6. Andrew Dolkart, "Visible City," Metropolis, 4 (September 1984), 26ff.
7. Ibid., 26-27.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

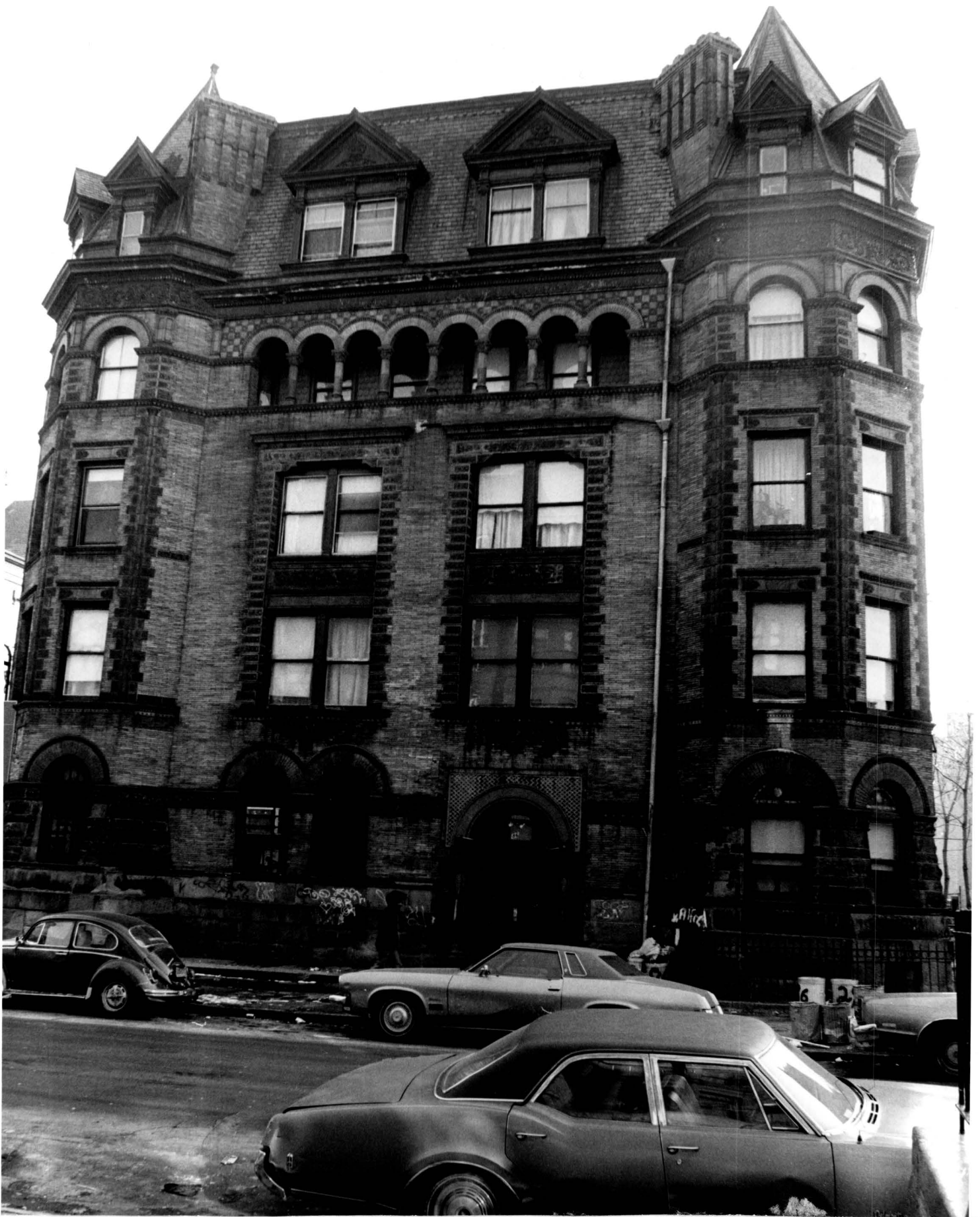
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Alhambra Apartments has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Alhambra Apartments is one of Brooklyn's major apartment houses; that it is a distinguished design in a romantic combination of Romanesque Revival and Queen Anne styles; that its architect, Montrose W. Morris, was one of the most prominent and creative Brooklyn architects of the period; that the skillful use of brick patterns, window openings, and architectural details create a continuous movement within the facade; that the ingenious use of open loggias, arcades and towers relieves the strong horizontal massing of the building; that the subtle polychromatic effect of the various materials greatly enhances the architectural success of the building; that its scale and massing harmoniously blend with its rowhouse neighborhood; that although alterations have been made to the building, the overall dignity and power of the Alhambra have not been compromised; and that it is a outstanding example of turn-of-the-century apartment house design and adds greatly to the architectural heritage of the borough.

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 a Landmark the Alhambra Apartments, 500-518 Nostrand Avenue a/k/a 29-33 Macon Street, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 1843, Lot 20, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dolkart, Andrew. "Visible City." Metropolis, 4 (September, 1984), 26ff.
- Francis, Dennis Steadman. Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900. New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979.
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- Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide. New York, April 22, 1916, p. 634. Montrose Morris obituary.
- Stiles, Henry R., ed. History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York. New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884.



Architect: Montrose W. Morris

THE ALHAMBRA APARTMENTS
500-518 Nostrand Avenue
Halsey Street Facade
Built: 1889

Photo Credit: LPC, 1982



Architect: Montrose W. Morris

THE ALHAMBRA APARTMENTS
500-518 Nostrand Avenue
a/k/a/29-33 Macon Street
Brooklyn
Built: 1889

Photo Credit: Carl Foster
LPC



Architect: Montrose W. Morris

THE ALHAMBRA APARTMENTS
500-518 Nostrand Avenue
Central Area
Built: 1889

Photo Credit: Carl Foster
LPC



Architect: Montrose W. Morris

THE ALHAMBRA APARTMENTS
500-518 Nostrand Avenue
a/k/a 86-90 Halsey St.
Brooklyn
Built: 1889

Photo Credit: Carl Foster
LPC