

RENAISSANCE APARTMENTS, 140-144 Hancock Street a/k/a 488 Nostrand Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1892; architect Montrose W. Morris.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1837, Lot 53.

On June 14, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Renaissance Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Renaissance Apartments, a striking apartment house at the intersection of Nostrand Avenue and Hancock Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, was commissioned by Louis F. Seitz, a local realtor, in 1892 and designed by the noted Brooklyn architect, Montrose W. Morris.¹ The Renaissance is one of a number of commissions Morris executed for Seitz, including two other exceptional apartment buildings, the Alhambra, two blocks south on Nostrand Avenue; and the Imperial, on Bedford Avenue and Pacific Street at Grant Square, which is a grander version of the Renaissance. The Renaissance's design was inspired by the 16th-century chateaux of Renaissance France and executed in a skillfull combination of buff Roman brick, terra cotta, metal and slate.

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 has "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."² 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.³

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 Renaissance was completed, there was a distinct urban character to the neighborhood.

Montrose W. Morris, the architect of the Renaissance was born about 1861 in Hempstead, New York, and moved to Brooklyn while he was still a 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.⁴ 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. One of the visitors impressed with Morris's 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 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.⁵ 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, as in the Alhambra, and shifting in the 1890s to newly-popular classically-inspired styles with their more refined detail and lighter-toned materials, seen in the Renaissance and the Imperial.

The Renaissance 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 Renaissance were an inducement calculated to attract middle-class families, as was the building's scale and mass which blends so harmoniously with its surrounding

neighborhood of brick and brownstone rowhouses.

The Renaissance rises from a stone base for four stories with a picturesque slate mansard fifth story. The facade is designed in a striped pattern of continuous bands of terra cotta separated by five courses of buff Roman brick. The entrance section which faces Nostrand Avenue is brought forward creating a central pavilion flanked by full-height round corner towers. The main entrance has been boxed in by an inappropriate neo-Georgian addition but it probably was designed with Ionic columns carrying the foliate frieze which continues around the entire building above the first floor. All the windows of the first floor are square-headed and flat-arched with voussoirs laid up in soldier courses of alternating Roman brick and terra cotta. Above the entrance, the second, third, and fourth floors are vertically joined in a monumental Palladianesque triumphal arch. The central windows at the second and third floors of the arch are shallow, three-sided metal bays with a pediment over the second floor window and a simple entablature at the third. On either side of these metal bays are monumental, two-story high engaged fluted columns with Corinthian capitals. At the corners of the pavilion, the columns are echoed by square attached columns of the same order. Between the columns are square-headed windows with round-arched pediments at the second floor and windows with triangular pediments at the third. The columns carry an entablature broken over the central bay. Spanning the break, a deep, coffered round arch rises at the fourth floor. To either side of the arch are flat-arched windows similar to the first floor windows. The fifth floor is pierced by four square-headed windows with simple enframements. Above these is a simple modillioned cornice and a steep four-sided mansard. Flanking the central pavilion are three-story high bays designed in the same manner as the central bay of the pavilion. Above the fourth floor is the modillioned cornice from which rises the mansard with tall pedimented dormers.

The three round corner towers have three square-headed windows at the second and third stories that are identical in design to those of the first floor. The windows at the fourth floor are round-arched with Florentine arches echoing the deep rich classical arches of the main facade. The fifth floor windows are square-headed and simply enframed like those of the central pavilion. Each tower is topped by a slate conical roof with finials. The Hancock Street facade is characterized by two monumental arched bays with window treatment and details like those flanking the central pavilion on Nostrand Avenue. The building is currently vacant and partially sealed.

The Renaissance remains a dignified edifice of stately proportions. The strong curves of its corner towers and monumental arches, the romantic silhouette of its conical roofs and steep mansard roofs, and the buff tones of the Roman brick and terra cotta, all recall its French Renaissance antecedents and create a striking contrast to the angular, flat-roofed brownstones on the surrounding streets. The building has played an important role in the architectural development of this section of Brooklyn, is a fine work by one of the borough's major architects, and, visually, is an essential part of the streetscape of Nostrand Avenue.

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NOTES

1. Kings County, Office of the Register, Conveyances, Deeds, and Mortgages. Liber 2101, Page 459, 3/11/1892; Liber 2199, Page 17, 11/11/1893; Liber 2, Page 237, 3/4/1895.

Landmarks Preservation Commission, Brooklyn Survey: Bedford-Stuyvesant Proposed Historic District, (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1978), pp. 45-47.

2. Henry R. Stiles, ed., History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York, Vol. I (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), p. 155.

3. Brooklyn Survey, pp. 14-15.

4. Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide, New York, April 22, 1916, p. 634. Montrose Morris obituary.

Dennis Steadman Francis, Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900 (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), p. 56.

5. Andrew Dolkart, "Visible City," Metropolis, 4 (September, 1984), 26ff.

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 Renaissance 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 Renaissance Apartments is one of the most distinctive early apartment houses built in Brooklyn; that it is an impressive structure designed in a style inspired by the 16th-century chateaux of Renaissance France and executed in a skillful combination of buff Roman brick, terra cotta, metal and slate; that its architect, Montrose W. Morris, was one of the most prominent and creative Brooklyn architects of the period; that its scale and massing harmoniously blend with its rowhouse neighborhood; that it is a dignified edifice of stately proportions; that the strong curves of its corner towers and monumental arches, and its cornical roofs and mansards create a romantic silhouette which make the Renaissance an essential part of the streetscape of Nostrand Avenue; and that as a distinguished example of turn-of-the-century apartment house design, it played an important role in the architectural development of this section of Brooklyn.

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 Renaissance Apartments, 140-144 Hancock Street a/k/a 488 Nostrand Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 1837, Lot 53, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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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 RENAISSANCE APARTMENTS
488 Nostrand Avenue
a/k/a 140-144 Hancock Street
Brooklyn
Built: 1892

Photo Credit: LPC