

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 1, 1988; Designation List 211
LP -1552

ST. REGIS HOTEL, 699-703 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1901-1904 and 1927; architects Trowbridge & Livingston and Sloan & Robertson architects of extension.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1290, Lot 69.

On September 17, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the St. Regis Hotel, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to December 10, 1985, and again continued to March 11, 1986. The three hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The representative of the owner was not opposed to designation.

Summary

The St. Regis Hotel is one of the most elegant and sophisticated Beaux-Arts style buildings in New York. Among the oldest of the early "skyscraper" hotels, it rises nineteen stories above the intersection of Fifth Avenue and East 55th Street. Begun in 1901, it was designed as the city's most luxurious hotel by the firm of Trowbridge & Livingston. The St. Regis was commissioned by John Jacob Astor whose family had built the city's first luxury hotel, the Astor House of 1836. The St. Regis is still one of the most important buildings on Fifth Avenue, contributing to the avenue's fashionable character, reminding us all of its extraordinarily rich past.

History

The development of the luxury hotel in New York began when John Jacob Astor (1763-1848) commissioned architect Isaiah Rogers to design a hotel to be erected on the site of his former house on fashionable lower Broadway opposite City Hall Park.¹ When completed in 1836, the restrained Greek Revival facade of the Astor House masked an interior that provided unequalled services and appointments. The hotel was an instant success with both visitors and city residents, setting a standard to be met or surpassed by all future hotels seeking to attract wealthy travelers and businessmen.²

The Astor House maintained its position as New York's finest hotel for over fifteen years until the city experienced a period of unprecedented economic and physical growth. The boundaries of the city expanded northward and the fashionable center moved "uptown" to Broadway between Canal and Houston Streets. A host of hotels were erected, prompted in part by the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1853, with the finest and most lavish rising along this section of Broadway. Prominent among them were the St. Nicholas at Spring Street and its neighbor across Broadway, the

Metropolitan, which had incorporated in its structure the garden of the old and famous Niblo's Gardens.³ These hotels not only lived up to the standards set by the Astor House, but even exceeded them, vying to outdo each other in opulence. After the Civil War and the recovery of the economy from the general economic depression that followed, the relentless northward growth of the city resumed, and a number of grand hotels opened near Madison Square along Fifth Avenue and Broadway. Two--the Gilsey House and the Grand (both designated New York City Landmarks)--still stand on Broadway.

John Jacob Astor (1864-1912) and his cousin William Waldorf Astor again exerted their family's influence as arbiters of taste and fashion in both the worlds of high society and real estate by constructing the hotel Waldorf Astoria in 1892 and 1897 on the site of two neighboring family mansions on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 34th Streets, now the site of the Empire State Building.⁴ In 1892, William Waldorf Astor also commissioned the New Netherland Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street. These hotels heralded the transformation of Fifth Avenue from an exclusive residential street--Millionaires' Row--to a fashionable commercial thoroughfare. Moreover, they were the first of the hotels to combine two separate building types: the skyscraper, previously restricted to the downtown area and to office use; and the hotel, which had generally been low-scaled and essentially domestic in character.

A decade after these hotels opened, the city once again underwent a substantial change. Major civic improvements, particularly in rapid transit, transformed the character and pattern of movement of the city's residents. The first subways were being built, three East River bridges were either in the planning stages or under construction, as were the two great railroad stations, Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal. The theater district had moved uptown to Broadway and Times Square, and Fifth Avenue had become "what Regent and Bond Streets are to London, the Rue de la Paix to Paris, the Unter den Linden to Berlin, the Ringstrasse to Vienna..."⁵

Distinct hotel districts developed. The areas immediately around the railway stations attracted hotels catering to transient businessmen. On Broadway and the adjacent mid-town side streets hotels for tourists sprang up. The Fifth Avenue hotels were built for the well-to-do in New York for the winter social season or on extended business.

The Waldorf Astoria, which remained the premier luxury hotel was, however, becoming dated:

...the combination of being fashionable with being so enormous leads to a queer mixture of people at times, and gives an excuse for the gibe that the Waldorf 'provides exclusiveness for the masses.'⁶

A new kind of luxury hotel, providing a more exclusive and refined environment, was in demand. The St. Regis was specifically designed to fill this new demand:

Literally no expense has been spared to make

the hotel (the St. Regis) as safe, as convient and as luxurious as the most expensive private house in the city. It establishes, consequently, a new standard of quality in hotel building, and one which is not likely to be surpassed during the life of the present generation.⁷

The Architects

The architectural firm of Trowbridge & Livingston was commissioned by John Jacob Astor to design his new hotel. The firm was established in 1894 when Samuel Beck Parkman Trowbridge, Goodhue Livingston and Stockton B. Colt left the office of George B. Post and formed the partnership of Trowbridge, Colt & Livingston. Colt left in 1897.

S. B. P. Trowbridge (1862-1925) was born in New York City, son of William Petit and Lucy Parkman Trowbridge. At the time of his birth, Trowbridge's father, whose initial career was in the military, was the superintending engineer of the construction of Fort Totten Battery, repairs to Fort Schuyler, and work at Governor's Island (all designated New York City Landmarks). He was also professor of dynamic engineering at Yale and, from 1877 until his death in 1892, he was professor of engineering at the Columbia School of Mines. Undoubtedly, Samuel Trowbridge was influenced in his choice of career by his father's profession. After his early education in the city's public schools, Samuel did his undergraduate studies at Trinity College in Hartford. On graduating in 1883, he entered Columbia's School of Mines where his father was teaching, and, later, furthered his training at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Goodhue Livingston (1867-1951), a descendant of a prominent colonial New York family, received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Columbia during the same period Trowbridge was at the school. Their partnership was a long and productive one.

The firm is best known for its public and commercial buildings, which, besides the St. Regis, include the B. Altman Department Store (1905-13); Engine Company 7, Ladder Company 1 (1905) at 100 Duane Street; the banking headquarters of J. P. Morgan (1913) at 23 Wall Street; the Oregon State Capitol (1936-38), designed in association with Francis Keally; and the Hayden Planetarium (1935) of the American Museum of Natural History at West 81st Street and Central Park West.

Trowbridge & Livingston also designed a number of residential buildings in a variety of styles popular at the time, including the neo-Federal, the Beaux-Arts, and the neo-Italian Renaissance, examples of which can be found on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The style the firm chose for the St. Regis, the French inspired Beaux-Arts, was used for a number of contemporary monumental civic structures such as the new Grand Central Terminal, the New York Public Library, Surrogates Court, and the approach to the Manhattan Bridge (all designated New York City Landmarks). The style was well suited to monumental

structures, characterized as it is by strict symmetry, strong historical allusions to classical architecture, boldly scaled detail, and sculptural use of materials. The style was equally well-suited to a nineteen-story hotel skyscraper planned to soar over an important section of the city's "Queen of Avenues".

A major expansion of the hotel began in 1927 and the firm chosen was Sloan & Roberston, one of the important New York architectural firms of the 1920s and '30s. John Sloan (1888-1954) studied architecture at New York University, then supervised construction for the U. S. Army in various capacities between 1908 and 1920. In private practice in 1920, he received the commission for the Pershing Square Building, 100 East 42nd Street. He formed a partnership in 1924 with T. Markoe Robertson (1878-1962) who had been educated at Yale University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The firm was responsible for the Chanin Building, 122 East 42nd Street; the Graybar Building, 420 Lexington Avenue; the Maritime Exchange Building, 80 Broad Street; the 29 Broadway office building; the Plaza Building, 625 Madison Avenue; and apartment buildings at 1 Beekman Place and 895 Park Avenue. The firm was also active in the designing of buildings for hospitals and institutions including: the House of Detention for Women at 10 Greenwich Avenue (now demolished); the Ward's Island Sewage Disposal Plant; the Rikers Island Penitentiary; buildings for the Harlem Hospital; and the Southampton Hospital. Architectural plans for the West Side Elevated Highway between Canal and West 72nd Streets and the New York State exhibit building, marine amphitheater and stage at the 1939 New York World's Fair were also carried out by the firm.

Description

Built of limestone, the original section of the St. Regis is an elegant and sophisticated example of the Beaux-Arts style. It was erected in 1901-04 and rises nineteen stories above the intersection of East 55th Street and Fifth Avenue.⁸ The Fifth Avenue facade is five bays wide and the East 55th Street elevation extends ten bays. Following the tenets of the Beaux-Arts tradition, the hotel imitates a classical column, consisting of a base, shaft and capital. The first two stories of the hotel--the base--are deeply rusticated and pierced by round-arch openings at the ground story and square-headed windows at the second. A prominent balustraded balcony which runs continuously from the Fifth Avenue facade to the East 55th Street elevation, is carried on massive console brackets with garlands. This balcony strongly and clearly separates the two-story base of the building from the upper stories. The next three stories are designed in a subtle and elegant manner to soften the transition from the base to the shaft of the building. The third and fourth stories are fully rusticated but only three quarters of the fifth is. The windows of the third and fourth are square-headed while those of the fifth are segmentally arched. Slightly projecting balconies with elegant iron railings mark the windows of the fourth and bracketed balconies with iron railings grace each window of the fifth. A variation appears at Fifth Avenue where the central three windows have a continuous balcony. A band course at impost level of the fifth story further enhances the division of the base and the shaft. The third through fifth stories are embellished by massive garlands which flank each of the bays with the exception of the three central windows on Fifth Avenue.

The treatment of the next seven stories, the main shaft of the building, consists of segmental-arched windows with moldings and keystones, rusticated end bays, smooth-faced stone surrounding the central windows, and projecting sills with iron railings. At the thirteenth story another transition begins from the shaft to the ornate capital of the mansard roof. The windows at this story are square-headed and at the end bays are flanked by stylized pilasters. The central windows share a common balcony with brackets and iron railing. A shallow bracketed cornice divides the thirteenth from the fourteenth story. At the fourteenth story the ebullient mansard begins. The segmental windows of the fourteenth are flanked by monumental console brackets that carry a balustraded cornice that bows over the end bays. Behind the balustrade, the fifteenth and sixteenth stories are joined vertically. At the end bays, the windows are flanked by smooth pilasters that carry a broken pediment. The central windows are flanked by paneled pilasters that support round-arched pediments. The seventeenth and eighteenth stories are within the slate and copper mansard. The end bays of the seventeenth have oval windows within an exuberant round-arch pediment carried on brackets. The central windows have contrastingly simple eared enframements topped by triangular pediments. Flanking the central window are free-standing garlanded urns. The eighteenth story has simple enframed oval windows except on Fifth Avenue where later alterations have created simple dormers for all but one window. The roof is crowned by an undulating copper cresting in a stylized shell motif.

The windows of the original hotel are intact with few exceptions. All are kalamein and were designed as French casements with transoms, the most elaborate reserved for the end bays. These windows consist of central casements flanked by sidelights and topped by transoms with central ovals supported by diminutive brackets. The windows are an important element in the design of the building and contribute to the success of its sophisticated Beaux-Arts style.

The southern elevation of the hotel, along the lot line, has a similar though simpler treatment than the main facades. It is also faced with limestone but the architectural details such as brackets, band courses and window enframements are flat, almost flush with the plane of the elevation. Further east, wrapping around a light court, the elevation is rendered in buff brick, stone and copper. Notable are the projecting, full-height copper bay and the two, flush copper bays. A one-story high roof-top addition with a three-story tower built of buff brick is visible above this elevation.

A number of major alterations have been made to the first story of the Fifth Avenue facade over the years, the first the result of a mandate by the City for the widening of Fifth Avenue in 1908.⁹ The East 55th Street ground floor which has always served as the main entrance to the hotel has suffered less than the Fifth Avenue facade. It still retains two of the original three arched entrances with their curvilinear metal and glazed doors, and the distinctive doorman's kiosk. The elliptical kiosk, made of brass and copper, is characterized by a round-arched glazed door flanked by windows that follow the curve of the ellipse. Beneath the windows are copper panels.

The Sloan & Robertson addition of 1927 on East 55th Street is restrained and does not compete or detract from the original building, but reinterprets the earlier design and restates it in architectural terms of the 1920s.¹⁰ It follows the same pattern of the original with a base, shaft and capital of the classical column. It uses the same material--limestone--and rises to the same height; however, there is no ornament and all the windows are sharply cut, recessed and square-headed. The first three stories are deeply rusticated continuing the lines of the original building and serve as the base of the annex. Shallow rustication marks the fifth, sixth and seventh stories. The remaining stories are smooth-faced. Rather than duplicate the second-story cornice of the original, a simple molding marks the beginning of the fourth story which is at the level of the second-story cornice. Above the fourth story is a smooth projecting bandcourse calling attention to the fifth and sixth stories which are vertically joined by pilasters. Along with the seventh story, they form the transitional section between the base and the shaft, corresponding to the original building's transitional third, fourth and fifth stories. The Sloan & Robertson elevation also has a central section, from the eighth to the fourteenth story, recalling the shaft of the classical column. The fifteenth story, marked by rustication and bandcourses above and below, echoes the balconied thirteenth story of the 1901-04 building. There is a simple sixteenth story crowned by a shallow balustraded cornice. The seventeenth and eighteenth stories are vertically joined by pilasters and topped by a parapet with urns. Behind the parapet is the two-story mansard with penthouse. The eastern elevation of this addition, along the lot line, is of buff brick with square-headed windows. Although the annex is as large as the original building, Sloan & Robertson never attempted to equal or to outdo the Trowbridge & Livingston design but with tasteful restraint and careful attention the the essential plan of the first building, payed a compliment to it in a more modern idiom.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This John Jacob Astor was the first to bear this name in America., See: "Astor, John Jacob," Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 1, ed. Allen Johnson (New York, 1927), 397.
2. It should be noted that the Astor House and all subsequent luxury or first-rate hotels in New York were used as winter residences by wealthy New Yorkers during the nineteenth century, which influenced the development of the New York apartment house. It was remarked upon that even before the Astor House was finished some of, "...the most fashionable and wealthy people' in the city had arranged for suites in the Astor house,..., as winter residences and had already selected sites on the Hudson for summer villas." John A. Kouwenhoven, The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York (New York, 1972), 176.
3. Niblo's was one of the most successful "resorts" in the city during the 1830s and 1840s. It consisted of a garden, stage and architectural follies, and theatrical productions were shown. Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor was first sung here in 1843. Destroyed by fire in 1846, Niblo's was rebuilt within the Metropolitan Hotel in 1852.
4. The fourth by this name, who died in the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. See: "Astor, John Jacob," DAB, vol. 1, ed. Allen Johnson (New York, 1927), 400.
5. Fifth Avenue, (New York, 1915), 5-6.
6. "The New Metropolitan Hotels," Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, (Sept. 3, 1904), 478.
7. Ibid.
8. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1290, Lot 69. NB 170-1901, NB 560-03.
9. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1290, Lot 69. Alt. 1662-1911.
10. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 1290, Lot 69. Alt 267-1927.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 St. Regis Hotel 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 St. Regis Hotel, when built, was one of the most luxurious hotels in the city; that, it was commissioned by John Jacob Astor whose family built New York's first luxury hotel; that, its elegant Beaux-Arts facade was designed by the notable architectural firm of Trowbridge & Livingston; that, the St. Regis Hotel, along with others, heralded the transformation of Fifth Avenue from an exclusive, low-rise, residential street to a fashionable commercial thoroughfare of tall buildings; that, the later addition to the St. Regis by the firm of Sloan & Robertson skillfully compliments the original Beaux-Arts design and is a good example of the architecture of its period; and that, the St. Regis is still one of the most important elements in the architectural fabric of this section of Fifth Avenue and contributes greatly to its sophisticated character.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the St. Regis Hotel, 699-703 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1290, Lot 69, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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"The New Metropolitan Hotels." Real Estate Record and Builders Guide.
Sept. 3, 1904, 478.



Photo Credit: Carl
Forster, LPC

HOTEL ST. REGIS
699-703 Fifth Avenue

Architect: Trow-
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Date: 1901-04; 1927



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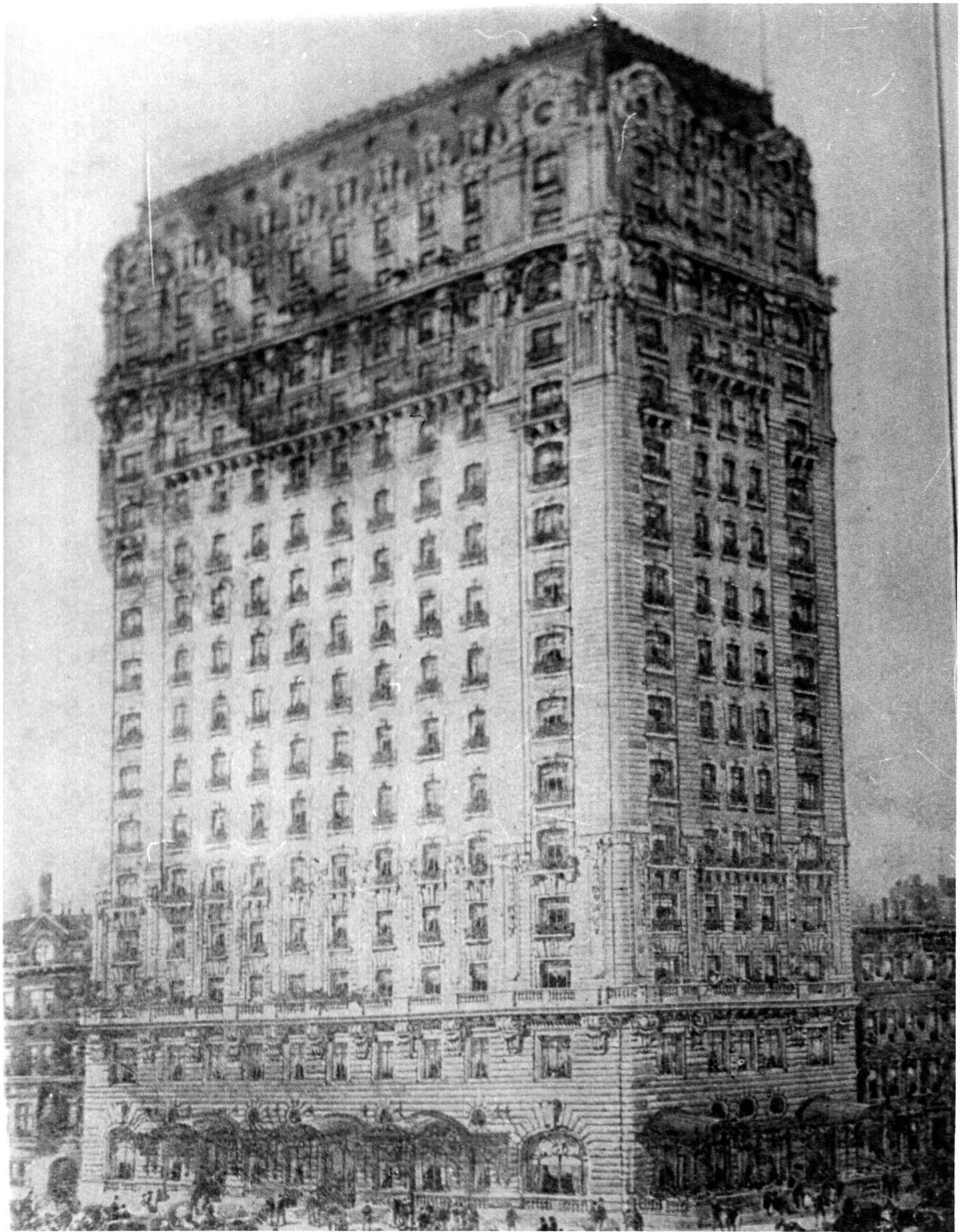
Date: 1901-04; 1927



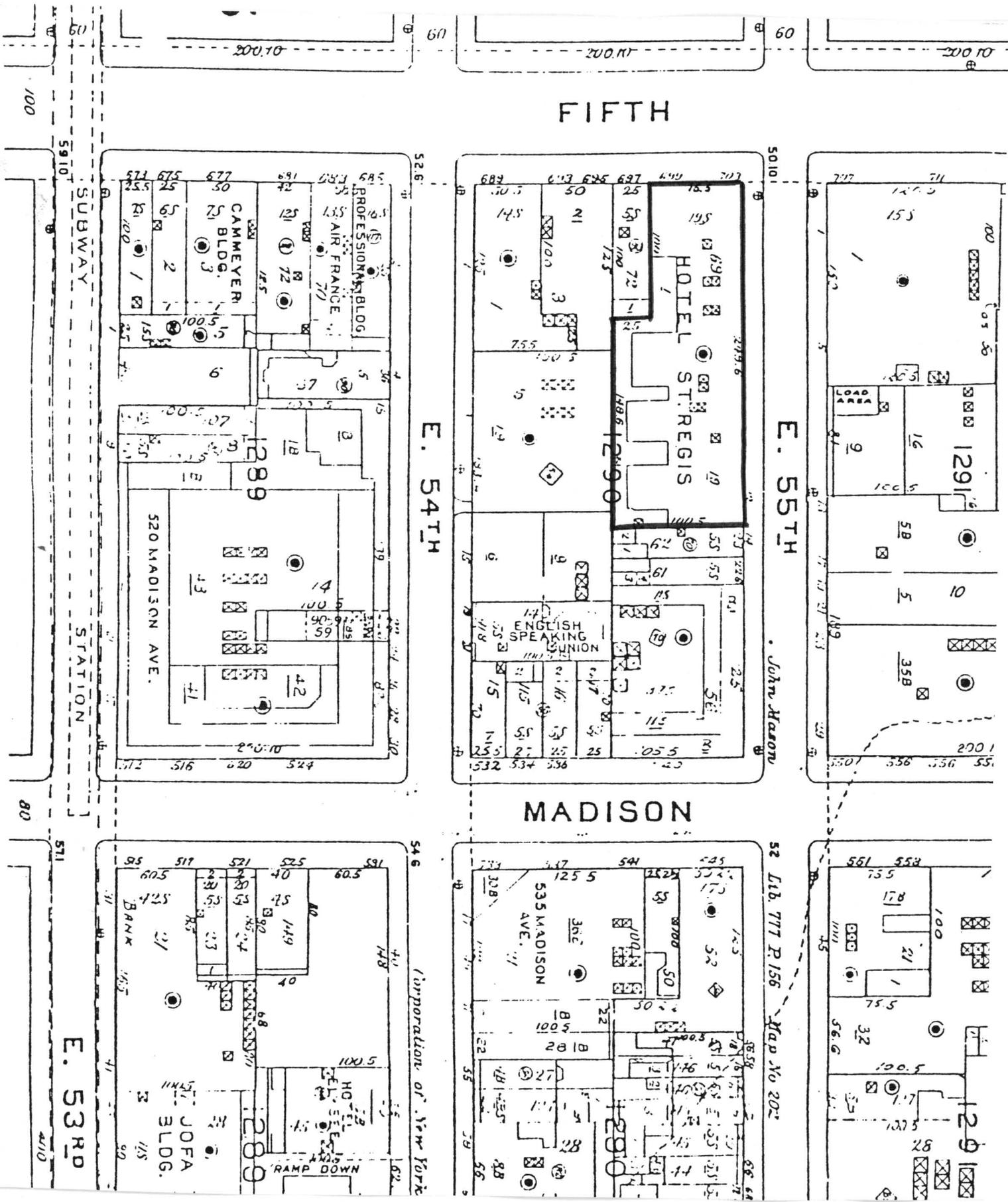
HOTEL ST. REGIS
Mansard



HOTEL ST. REGIS
Doorway



HOTEL ST. REGIS
1904



St. Regis Hotel, Landmark Site
 Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1987-88.