Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 5, 1993, Designation List 248
LP-1763

(FORMER) CENTURY ASSOCIATION BUILDING
109-111 East 15th Street, Manhattan.
Built 1869; architects Gambrill & Richardson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 871, Lot 10.

On December 12, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the (Former) Century Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 27). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. A representative of the owner did not take a position regarding the designation and no witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The hearing was continued on April 3, 1990 (Item No. 22). At that time eight letters were read into the official record, including one letter from the owner, expressing opposition to designation, and seven letters in favor of designation. The Commission has received other letters in favor of designation.

Summary

The Century Association Building was designed by the firm of Gambrill & Richardson, whose partners were both members of the association and one of whom, Henry Hobson Richardson, went on to become one of this country’s most prominent architects. Built in 1869, the building appears to be Manhattan’s oldest surviving structure erected as a clubhouse. Its exterior, which remains remarkably intact, heralded a wave of neo-Grec buildings in the early 1870s. The Century Association, founded in 1847 to promote interest in literature and the arts, attracted authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and the fine arts, many of whom were national leaders in their fields. During the era when the Union Square vicinity flourished as New York’s amusement district, the organization established its first permanent home in 1857 on this East 15th Street site in an existing dwelling. The Centurions rebuilt the clubhouse in 1869 to the designs of Gambrill & Richardson and remained there until 1891. The Century Association Building is a concrete reminder of the distinguished history of one of New York’s most prominent institutions.
Early History of the Neighborhood

Union Square, designated a public space in 1832 and opened to the public in 1839, was quickly thereafter encircled with rowhouses and larger town houses, churches and small hotels, becoming the city's most fashionable neighborhood during the 1840s. The blocks extending from the east side of Union Square also were characterized by their rowhouses, except for East 15th Street, which in addition contained an industrial complex of five buildings on the south side of the street and two large frame dwellings, one of which was soon to be remodeled for the Century Association, on the north side of the street. Shops began to appear on the square in the 1860s and during the subsequent years the neighborhood developed into an amusement district, featuring the Academy of Music, many theaters, piano companies and showrooms, music stores, music publishers, public art galleries, studios for painters, photographers, and sculptors, restaurants, and private clubhouses, including that of the Century Association.

The Century Association

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a few private clubs were formed by men of similar social standing or shared interests. Among these organizations was the Sketch Club, founded in 1829, which promoted interest in literature and the arts. In 1847 it merged with an organization of Columbia University alumni, the Column Club, to form The Century. The association’s founders, including poet and editor William Cullen Bryant and Gulian C. Verplanck, an author and congressman, adopted its first constitution in January, 1847, and invited one hundred gentlemen — authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and the fine arts — to join the group. The organization’s name was a product of the number originally invited to be members. Dedicated to "plain living and high thinking," Centurions were men of culture and achievement noted for their informal social intercourse, frugal dinners and refreshments, inspiring art exhibitions, and jovial Twelfth Night celebrations.

Like other New York clubs during that era, the Century had several temporary locations, eventually settling in the area of Manhattan near Union and Madison squares, now known as Ladies Mile. At first the Century met at No. 495 Broadway, over Del Vecchio’s picture store. Subsequently the members rented rooms in No. 435 Broome Street and then in No. 575 Broadway, over a millinery shop. An increase in membership required larger facilities for the semi-monthly meetings, so the club moved to No. 24 Clinton Place (now 46 East 8th Street) in 1852. During the spring of 1857 The Century was incorporated as the Century Association, increased its maximum number of resident memberships to 250, and purchased No. 42 East 15th Street (now known as No. 109-111, see fig. 1), remaining at that location for thirty-four years. During the first decades of the club’s existence, its membership rolls increased dramatically, comprising a veritable "Who’s Who" of American artists, architects, authors, publishers, actors, statesmen, businessmen, and educators. (See appendix A for lists of significant Centurions of that period.)

Many other social, political, and special interest clubs formed in the nineteenth century; however, apparently none of these clubhouses remain. Some of the clubs never erected specialized buildings in the first place, simply converting existing dwellings for their purposes. The other organizations built clubhouses which they later sold in order to move uptown and these buildings were either demolished or unrecognizably altered. Therefore, it seems that the Century Association Building on East 15th Street is the oldest surviving clubhouse in Manhattan.

The East 15th Street Clubhouse and its Early Transformations

A two-and-one-half-story frame dwelling of forty-by-twenty square feet stood on this site as early as 1847, when tax assessments began to be recorded for properties on East 15th Street. The dwelling was purchased in 1855 by builder Isaac Lewis, who then sold it to the Century Association in 1857 for $24,000. The club immediately renovated the property to suit its needs, relying on member Joseph C. Wells, an architect, to oversee the work, which cost $11,000. Additions included a masonry rear extension, which at fifty-by-twenty square feet had a larger footprint than the original residence, and a stately new facade, in the Italianate palace mode. Either sheathed in ashlar stone or stuccoed and scored to resemble stone, the facade was set behind a balustraded staircase and areaways demarcated by balustraded fences. Four shuttered openings with multi-pane windows pierced the surface of the raised basement. The first-story entrance, articulated by pilasters and a pedimented entablature, was flanked by four shuttered openings with pedimented surrounds and multi-pane windows. Five second-story openings repeated this form but were slightly shorter. The cornice was surmounted by a broad central pediment which featured an oval window.

Within a few years the increased membership of the club and its expanding program of activities necessitated larger facilities, particularly for meetings and servants. In early 1866 a Committee of Thirteen
was appointed to study the question of whether the club members should relocate or rebuild their clubhouse. Due to financial concerns, the committee recommended improving the site on East 15th Street. One member of the committee, Charles D. Gambrill, submitted his proposal for alterations, which included a new front -- finished in brick, trimmed in Lockport limestone, and capped by a mansard roof -- and a rear extension to accommodate a first-story billiard room and a second-story art gallery. In May, 1867, the firm of Gambrill & Post submitted the proposal for the rear extension to the Department of Buildings and it was subsequently executed.

For reasons not documented, other interior changes and a new facade were stalled for almost two years; the architect or architects involved in the planning may have been changed and may have modified the proposed alterations. Between early 1866, when the committee was formed, and March, 1869, when the building impasse was resolved, architect Henry Hobson Richardson became a Centurion and replaced George B. Post as Gambrill’s partner. A contract for construction was settled in early 1869 and when the Department of Buildings issued a permit to build, the architects of record were listed as Gambrill & Richardson. This lag of time between the original proposal and actual construction would have provided an opportunity for Richardson’s involvement, though there is no proof of it. The alterations, which included the extension of the attic into a third story and the erection of a new facade (fig. 2), were carried out in 1869 and cost $21,000. The vague description of the new facade as first proposed (see above) resembles the facade as built, but we cannot know for certain if changes were introduced before the final proposal was approved.

Gambrill & Richardson

Charles Dexter Gambrill (1832-1880) was an alumnus of Harvard College who apprenticed in the architectural offices of George Snell in Boston and Richard M. Hunt in New York. He first practiced with George B. Post and then joined Henry H. Richardson in a partnership that lasted from 1867 until 1878, though Richardson moved to Brookline, Massachusetts in 1874. Later, as a partner of H.E. Ficken, Gambrill was responsible for No. 16 Washington Mews (1880, now in the Greenwich Village Historic District). He is also remembered as a specialist in Queen Anne residences and was among the first Fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

One of this country’s foremost architects, Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) studied at Harvard College and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Upon returning to the United States, he settled in New York where he briefly maintained an independent practice before establishing a partnership with Gambrill in 1867. That same year Richardson married and the couple lived in a house of his design, "Arrochar," at 45 McLean Avenue (1868-69) in the Clifton section of Staten Island, until their departure for Brookline in 1874. In addition to his connection to the Century Association Building, Richardson’s New York oeuvre includes the Jonathan Sturges Residence (1869-70, demolished) at 38 Park Avenue and Frederick Sturges Residence (1869-70, demolished) at 40 East 36th Street; the memorial (1876-77) to Rev. Henry Eglington Montgomery at the Church of the Incarnation; alterations (1875, demolished) to All Souls’ Church on Fourth Avenue; and alterations to five midtown residences (all demolished).

Richardson’s fame derives from the development of his highly personal, yet influential style, best seen in projects outside New York. His most prominent ecclesiastical commissions are Trinity Church (1872-77) and Rectory (1879-80) in Boston. His most memorable public and commercial buildings include the New York State Capitol (1875 and later) in Albany, the Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail (1883-88) in Pittsburgh, and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1885-87, demolished) in Chicago. Richardson’s residential work is highlighted by the Watts Sherman House (1875-76) in Newport, Rhode Island, the Stoughton House (1882-83) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Glessner House (1885-87) in Chicago. He designed many stations for the Boston and Albany Railroad as well as public libraries throughout eastern Massachusetts.

The question of who was the actual designer of the Century Association Building remains unanswered. Based on Mariana Van Rensselaer’s portrayal of Gambrill and Richardson’s partnership as being a purely convenient business arrangement with no artistic interaction, later accounts preclude any creative collaboration between the two men. Henry-Russell Hitchcock even denigrates Gambrill’s design ability, despite the architect’s obituary, which noted that he “was remarkable for the refinement and intelligence which characterized his artistic thought, and all his work bears the impression of a scholarly and singularly fastidious mind.” Further research on the relationship between the two architects must be done before historians can state with certainty that they practiced independently.

Though normally associated with the style of his mature work that has come to be called "Richardsonian Romanesque," Richardson was trained from 1859 to 1865 in Paris, where he was exposed to the impressive hôtels particuliers and more modest habitations bourgeoises. The latter building type more closely corresponded to American needs and can be seen as a model for his Agawam National Bank (1869-70, fig. 3) in Springfield, Massachusetts, and his William Dorsheimer
Residence (1868-71, fig. 4) in Buffalo, erected for a fellow Centurion. The contemporary French character of those two structures is echoed in the less refined design of the Century Association Building (erected 1869), so it does seem possible that Richardson played some part in the design of the clubhouse, at least for the new facade.

Design of the Century Association Building

Reflecting the architectural developments in Paris, a city much admired at that time for its leadership in architecture and style, the Century Association Building features a facade in the neo-Grec mode (fig. 5). This style, also called "graeco-Romantic" and epitomized in Henri Labrouste's masterpiece, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (1843-50), was a progressive attempt to formulate a modern architectural expression of the era. In America, the neo-Grec vocabulary was characterized by abstracted classical motifs, angular forms, and machine-cut, incised ornament (especially on lintels), producing a style well suited to cast iron, or, in this case, brick trimmed in stone. The typical horizontal banding functioned as support at points of structural stress or as design emphasis; eventually, architects began to design staggered bands which were created by connecting stone window lintels or sills with bands across intervening piers.

Richard Morris Hunt's Studio Building (1857, demolished) at 15 West 10th Street was a very early example of the style in New York. The neo-Grec Century Association clubhouse was erected to designs by Gambrill & Richardson twelve years later (1869), just before a wave of neo-Grec buildings appeared. In several of his works built in the 1870s, Hunt again relied on the neo-Grec vocabulary or combined the neo-Grec idiom with the forms of the more popular Victorian Gothic aesthetic. Other architects in New York and Boston employed a simplified version of the style for prominent building commissions, and the style quickly spread to other American cities. Many of the most visible neo-Grec structures in Manhattan are mercantile buildings in the downtown commercial district now known as Tribeca.

Subsequent History of No. 109-111 East 15th Street

As New York's fashionable neighborhoods moved further uptown and the Centurions again outgrew their clubhouse on East 15th Street, the association sold that building and moved into its present home, No. 7 West 43rd Street (1889-91, a designated New York City Landmark), designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White, and an exemplar of the grand club architecture that has come to characterize midtown. The Century Association continues to thrive as a prominent institution, its limits for resident and nonresident members having reached 1,200 and 900 respectively. [See appendix B for lists of prominent men who became Centurions after the club moved to West 43rd Street.]

Relatively few alterations have occurred to the former Century Association Building despite its occupation by several subsequent groups. While still inhabited by the Century Association in 1878, fire damaged part of the clubhouse, but it was soon repaired to designs by Gambrill & Richardson. In 1890 the structure was purchased by the Lager Beer Brewers Board of Trade, which erected a one-story rear extension. Identified as the United States Brewers' Association in King's Handbook of New York (1893), this organization represented the interests of its approximately 1,000 members who were distributed throughout the country. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the building was owned by the Manhattan chapter of the Sons of Italy Hall and then the Galicia Sporting Club, which affected interior alterations so that the basement and first two floors were used as a clubhouse and the third story accommodated a caretaker's apartment. During the mid-twentieth century, the building was occupied by the New York Joint Board of Shirt, Leisureware, Robe and Sportswear Workers Union. It is currently occupied by an Asian-American trading company. A drycleaning shop is located in the basement.

Among the alterations to the facade are the painting of the stone, removal of the iron cresting at the roof, installation of a vertically-mounted flagpole, and replacement of most of the window sash. Most of the changes have occurred at the base in conjunction with the removal of sidewalk projections: filling in the areaways and removing the areaway fences, changes to the cheek walls when the entryway steps were set back, removal of the rusticated stonework except for the keyed quoins at the window openings, the conversion of basement windows into doorways, and replacement of the entrance doors and transom.

Description

The only part of the former clubhouse which currently is visible from the street is its symmetrical, three-bay facade (figs. 5-7), which is faced in stone (now painted blue-gray), red brick, and gray slate tiles. The raised basement of chiseled ashlar (a simplification of the original stonework) has doorways (originally window openings) in the side bays, each of which is framed by quoining, contains a pair of glazed metal doors, and is reached via a staircase with historic iron railings. (The signage at the eastern doorway was installed in 1992.) The band course above the base is interrupted by the central segmentally-arched entrance which is flanked by narrow cheek walls, contains a pair of glazed metal doors and a plexiglass transom, and is reached by marble steps. The cheek walls support a stone
enframement with a cornice supported by end brackets and a raised keystone. Running along the bottom of the first story, a broad stone band is interrupted at the side bays by the window surrounds, which are simplified versions of the central surround and contain historic iron grilles. The second story features three stone-framed openings that rest on a stone cornice. The slightly wavy brick surface of these two stories is almost flush with its white mortar. The terminal cornice is surmounted by a steeply sloped mansard roof, covered with slate tiles, pierced by three dormers, and framed between brick end walls with coping. A historic two-over-two double-hung wood sash window survives at the western bay of the attic; the remaining openings have different configurations of wood sash windows. A metal downspout survives at the east side of the facade and a flagpole has been added at the center bay.

NOTES


3. Centurions (members of the Century Association) have traced the club's roots back as far as the American Academy of the Fine Arts, organized in 1802. See John Durand, *Prehistoric Notes of the Century Club* (n.p.: n.p., 1882), 5-6.


6. The relationship between Richardson and the Committee of Thirteen is undetermined; however, we do know that in addition to forming a partnership with Gambrill, Richardson was probably a relative of committee member John Priestley (Richardson’s mother was a Priestley).

7. For a drawing of the facade as originally built, see the frontispiece in Century Association, Reports, Constitution, By-Laws . . . 1889 (New York: Century Association, 1890).


10. See Van Rensselaer (1888); Hitchcock (1961) and (1966); Kowsky (1980); and Pierson (1982). One possible scenario is that Gambrill produced the design and supervised its construction without Richardson’s involvement. Christopher Gray, "Richardson’s Lost Work Discovered Housing a Travel Agency on East 15th," NYT, Dec. 11, 1988, real estate sec., p.10, hypothesizes that Richardson alone was responsible for the building. A third possibility, of course, is that the two architects collaborated on the project.


13. For example, Hunt was responsible for at least two significant neo-Grec monuments: the New York Tribune Building (1873-75, demolished) at Nassau and Spruce streets; and the Coal and Iron Exchange (1873-76, later the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company Building, demolished) at 17-21 Cortlandt Street. See Moses King, King’s Handbook of New York City (Boston: Moses King, 1893), 130-131, 676-677; Landau (1986), 50-51, 54-60. At his Administration Building of Presbyterian Hospital (1869-72) on East 17th Street, Hunt combined the neo-Grec and Victorian Gothic styles.

A review of the photographs in King’s Handbook (1893) points out that the total number of important neo-Grec buildings...
is relatively few. This is because the height in popularity of the neo-Grec style coincided with a lull in building activity, following the Financial Panic of 1873.

14. Resident membership was increased to 800 in 1890. According to Century Association, *Suggestions for a Club House for the Century Association* (n.p.: Century Association, n.d.), 4, another motive for the move was the loss of adequate natural light, due to the erection of Steinway Hall on the south side of the street, across from the clubhouse.

15. King, 798. New York County, Office of the Register, Block Index of Reindexed Conveyances and Abstract Index, Block 871, Lot 10. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 871, Lot 10. ALT 34-1878; ALT 2548-1927; C of O 14140 (1928); MC 1951-1945; ALT 827-1964.

16. Department of Building records for this lot do not clearly show the dates of these various alterations.
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 (former) Century Association Building 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 (former) Century Association Building was designed by the firm of Gambrill & Richardson, whose partners were both members of the association and one of whom, Henry Hobson Richardson, went on to become one of this country's most prominent architects; that the building, which was built in 1869, is the oldest known surviving structure erected as a clubhouse in Manhattan; that its stone-trimmed brick exterior, which remains remarkably intact, heralded a wave of neo-Grec buildings in the early 1870s; that the building replaced the organization's first permanent home, which had been established near Union Square in 1857, when that vicinity flourished as the city's amusement district; that the Century Association, founded in 1847 to promote interest in literature and the arts, attracted authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and the fine arts, many of whom were national leaders in their fields, and remained at this site until 1891; and that the building survives as a concrete reminder of the distinguished history of one of New York's most prominent institutions.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), 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 (former) Century Association Building, 109-111 East 15th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its Landmarks Site Manhattan Tax Map Block 871, Lot 10.
APPENDIX A: Selected notable Centurions associated with the clubhouse on East 15th Street and the years of their membership in the organization

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<tr>
<td>Leopold Eidlitz</td>
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<td>Charles D. Gambrill</td>
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<td>Charles C. Haight</td>
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<td>Richard Morris Hunt</td>
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<td>Edward H. Kendall</td>
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<td>Josiah Lane</td>
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<td>Frederick L. Olmsted</td>
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<td>Ehrick K. Rossiter</td>
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<td>Calvert Vaux</td>
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<td>William R. Ware</td>
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<td>J. Pierpont Morgan</td>
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<td>Alexander T. Stewart</td>
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<td>Theodore Roosevelt</td>
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<td>Elihu Root</td>
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<td>Asher B. Durand</td>
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<td>Augustus Saint-Gaudens</td>
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<td>Charles C. Tiffany</td>
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APPENDIX B: Selected notable Centurions since the club’s move to West 43rd Street

**Actors and playwrights**

- Edward Albee 1977-78
- John Barrymore 1924-42
- James Cagney 1969-82
- Hume Cronyn 1959-72

**Artists, photographers, and museum directors**

- Alexander S. Calder 1914-37
- Jean Dubuffet 1974-76
- Walker Evans 1954-75
- Daniel Chester French 1894-1931
- Charles Dana Gibson 1919-44
- C. Grant LaFarge 1892-1938
- James Johnson Sweeney 1945-86

**Architects and landscape architects**

- Grosvenor Atterbury 1900-56
- Henry Bacon 1907-24
- William A. Boring 1895-1937
- Marcel Breuer 1962-76
- Daniel H. Burnham 1895-1912
- J. Cleveland Cady 1891-1919
- John M. Carrère 1897-1911
- Henry Ives Cobb, Jr. 1968-88
- Ralph Adams Cram 1908-42
- Paul P. Cret 1927-45
- Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz 1891-1921
- J. André Fouilhoux 1942-45
- R. Buckminster Fuller 1955-83
- Cass Gilbert 1899-1934
- Romaldo Giurgola 1981-83
- Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue 1911-24
- Henry J. Hardenbergh 1892-1918
- Wallace K. Harrison 1933-81
- George L. Heins 1893-1907
- John Mead Howells 1937-54
- Joseph Hudnut 1930-36
- Harold VanBuren Magonigle 1930-35
- Benjamin Wistar Morris 1911-44
- Nathaniel A. Owings 1959-84
- John Russell Pope 1920-37
- Bruce Price 1891-1903
- Philip Sawyer 1901-49
- Egerton Swartwout 1919-43
- Stephen Francis Voorhees 1929-65

**Businessmen**

- John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 1930-60
- John D. Rockefeller III 1939-78
- Frederick A.O. Schwarz 1950-74

**Educators, writers, and publishers**

- Henry Adams 1892-1918
- Saul Bellow 1966-77
- Stephen Vincent Benét 1934-43
- John Cheever 1958-75
- Theodore DeVinne 1893-1914
- John R. Dos Passos 1959-70
- William Dean Howells 1897-1920
- Aldous Huxley 1958-63
- Rudyard Kipling 1895-1936
- Dumas Malone 1947-86
- Eric Severeid 1963-67
- Arthur Hays Sulzberger 1938-68
- Arnold J. Toynbee 1956-75
- Christopher Tunnard 1961-79
- John Updike 1972-77
- Thornton Wilder 1930-75

**Musicians**

- Benny Goodman 1967-86
- Andre Kostelanetz 1978-80
- Ignace J. Paderewski 1923-60
- Isaac Stern 1962-65

**Architectural historians and critics**

- Alan Burnham 1959-84
- Royal Cortissoz 1920-48
- William Bell Dinsmore 1928-73
- Hugh Ferriss 1948-62
- Henry-Russell Hitchcock 1972-87
- Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. 1961-80
- Fiske Kimball 1924-55
- George A. Kubler 1946-51
- Carroll L.V. Meeks 1956-66
- Vincent Scully 1978-86
- Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes 1911-32

**Statesmen and attorneys**

- William J. Brennan, Jr. 1958-60
- Zbigniew Brzezinski 1974-81
- Benjamin N. Cardozo 1926-38
- Dwight D. Eisenhower 1948-62
- Herbert Hoover 1919-64
- Henry Cabot Lodge 1892-1924
- Nelson A. Rockefeller 1937-79
- Franklin D. Roosevelt 1922-45
- Dean Rusk 1953-73
- Carl Schurz 1892-1906
- Adlai Stevenson 1952-65
- William Howard Taft 1913-30
Fig. 1: Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book* (1991-92), pl. 44

Fig. 2: Century Association, *Reports, Constitution, By-Laws ... 1889* (1890), frontispiece
Fig. 3: Agawam National Bank (1869-70) [Ochsner (1982), 64]

Fig. 4: William E. Dorsheimer Residence (1868-71) [Ochsner (1982), 55]
Fig. 5: (Former) Century Association Building, 109-111 East 15th Street [photo: DMB]
Fig. 6: (Former) Century Association Building, detail of window [photo: DMB]

Fig. 7: (Former) Century Association Building, detail of base [photo: DMB]