

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 19, 1991 Designation List 232
LP-1814

ACTORS STUDIO (former SEVENTH ASSOCIATE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH), 432 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built c. 1858. Architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1053, Lot 49.

On September 11, 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Actors Studio (Item No. 14). At the request of the representative of the owner, the hearing was continued to December 11, 1990 (Item No. 3). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses at both hearings spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner has taken no position on the proposed designation. The Commission has received two statements supporting the designation.¹

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Actors Studio building, constructed as a small neighborhood church for the Seventh Associate Presbyterians, shortly after the congregation purchased the land in 1858, is a fine and rare example of a vernacular Greek Revival structure in Manhattan which has survived in a remarkably intact condition. Maintained by its original congregation for eighty-six years, the building has been owned by the famous Actors Studio since 1955. The Actors Studio is a non-profit drama school, run by and for professional actors, known for its teaching of the "Method" technique. Created by Konstantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theater, this acting system was promoted in this country by Lee Strasberg, longtime artistic director of the Actors Studio. Since its inception, the school has been the training ground for some of America's most distinguished actors. The building's simple Greek Revival design, with a modified Tuscan temple front, is a late example of the style which was so popular in New York during the 1830s and 1840s. The well-proportioned facade of the building, articulated by unadorned pilasters and a low pediment, illustrates the high quality of the work of the architect-builder who, like many of the period, used pattern books to create a distinctive Greek Revival style building. The building is a fitting home for its famous school, the Actors Studio.

History of the Neighborhood

From its earliest history, Manhattan grew northward from the southern tip of the island as the population expanded. From 1850 to 1860, Manhattan's population grew by approximately 300,000 people, while streets in the area of what is today's midtown were built up with residences.² During this period, the fashionable districts tended to be located around Fifth Avenue, near the middle of the island. The neighborhoods closest to the rivers were less desirable because these areas became the locations for the necessary, but least pleasant elements of urban life: garbage dumps, slaughterhouses, stables, lime kilns, lumberyards, warehouses, and distilleries. Along the island's western edge, the commerce of the waterfront and the New York Central Railroad, whose tracks ran along the water, brought freight as well as a certain rough and tumble character to the west side of Manhattan. The section from the Twenties through the Fifties between Eighth and Tenth Avenues, which by the turn of the century had become known as "Hell's Kitchen," maintained this less-than-savory atmosphere well into the twentieth century.

The land on which this building was constructed, once within the farm tract of Robert B. Norton and then owned by his children, was not subdivided into lots and sold until 1849. Manhattan's expanding population in the 1850s and the building boom which followed the Civil War in the 1860s provided the impetus for extensive residential growth in this area, to the east of the most industrialized section. The neighborhood quickly filled with brick and brownstone rowhouses, tenements, and "French flats," providing moderate-cost housing for those who worked in the local industries as well as those who could not afford to live in more affluent neighborhoods.

A growing population develops with it certain institutions, and churches are among the first to be built. During the mid-nineteenth century, the number of churches in Manhattan soared, from 84 in 1825, to 290 in 1857, most located in the newly developing sections of the city.³ One of these built in the following year was occupied by the Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church, a small working-class congregation formed to serve the local population.

History of the Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church

The Presbyterian Church was started in New York early in the eighteenth century, with its first church on Wall Street. Through the rest of the century, there were three congregations: that on Wall Street, a second known as the "Brick Church" on Beekman Street, and another in open fields on Rutgers Street. None of the church buildings of these early congregations survive. Near the middle of the eighteenth century, groups began to break away from the established collegiate form of worship, following factions which were being established in Scotland known as the Covenanters and the Seceders. In this country these new branches became known as the Reformed Presbyterians, the Associate Presbyterians, and later the Associate Reformed

Presbyterians. The number of people declaring themselves Presbyterians multiplied as did the buildings constructed to house the growing congregations. By 1871, the Presbyterians were the most numerous and active Protestant group in New York City, with more than ninety churches and mission chapels among the various branches.⁴

The Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church was formed in 1855 as an Associate Presbyterian congregation. The congregation, also known as the West Forty-fourth Street Presbyterian Church, was small but growing, with fifty-five members in 1857 and eighty-nine members in 1858. From 1857 until 1859 its pastor was James B. Whitten. In 1858, the congregation became affiliated with the United Presbyterian Church, an umbrella organization of the Associate Reformed Presbyterians and Associate Presbyterians. In January of that year the trustees of the church purchased two lots on the south side of West 44th Street, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, to build a church building.⁵ A sequence of ministers served the congregation, with H.H. Wallace being in residence longest, from 1886 until 1925. It was during his tenure that the congregation saw its largest membership, reaching 225 members in 1900. After this, the membership declined. The last minister, J. C. White, left in 1942 and the congregation was officially disbanded in 1944.⁶

The Design of the Building

By combining two lots, the Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church created a broad site for its simple, freestanding Greek Revival style church building, constructed shortly after the purchase of the land. For their new building, the leaders of the group chose a traditional and accepted building style, the Greek Revival, even though most church architecture during this period was executed in a more up-to-date style, such as the Gothic Revival.

The Greek Revival style had been extremely popular in New York from the late 1820s through the 1840s, and was generally on the wane by the 1850s, although scattered examples from this late date can be found. In its heyday the Greek Revival was the modern, fashionable style, with romantic associations to the ancient democracy. Following the historical example of ancient classical temples, the facades of these buildings were often characterized by columns, frequently in the Doric order, supporting a simple pediment. Although this style was used for the designs of all types of buildings, from courthouses to rowhouses to monuments, its dignified proportions and fine details lent itself particularly well to public buildings and churches. Also the original Greek prototypes could be adapted to include the large interior spaces often necessary to the function of these latter building types. Town & Thompson's Ascension Church (1827-29, demolished) on Canal Street was the first Greek Revival church built in New York, while another early church which was very influential in the popularization of this style was the Carmine Street Church (1831, demolished) by Town & Davis. This building had two Doric columns in antis forming a recessed front porch with enclosed areas on either side housing stairways, thus forming a five-part composition. This type of facade was copied repeatedly, becoming an almost standardized formula for church fronts.⁷

A later version of this style which survives in New York is the Mariner's Temple (c.1844, 12 Oliver Street, a designated New York City Landmark) built by Isaac Lucas, an architect-builder who simplified the front but retained the elegance of the style. Lucas was one of the many builders who, often without formal design training, were instrumental in the spread of this style and its variations throughout the nation. Such architect-builders adapted designs from the numerous builders' guides which proliferated at the time, bringing this popular new style to clients who could not afford or had no access to the young nation's few trained architects.⁸ Not being trend setters, these builders and their clients often continued to use established styles after their popularity had waned elsewhere.

It was such an architect-builder who created the small, vernacular church building on West 44th Street for the Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church, in a style which has been called "Bricklayer Greek."⁹ Simplifying the forms found on the Carmine Street Church, this designer dropped the columns in antis, retaining only four flat brick pilasters with Tuscan capitals which project slightly to form three bays for the window and door openings. At one time a small portico enclosed the main doorway but it has been removed, leaving a primarily flat facade whose planar quality is striking. While many such simplified Greek Revival buildings were constructed in Manhattan during the mid-nineteenth century, the continued existence of this church building is a rare survivor.

The Actors Studio

After the Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church disbanded, the property was foreclosed in 1945. Acquired by Veneranda Esposito, the building was leased to the American Theatre Wing, Inc. under the direction of Miss Antoinette Perry and used as an acting school. In 1951 it was sold to the National Amputation Foundation, which also maintained a school on the premises, to teach trades to its disabled members.

The building was sold again in 1955 to the Actors Studio.¹⁰ This organization was incorporated in 1947 in order to "establish, operate and maintain a non-profit making school for the training and development of actors, actresses, and other theatrical artists in the dramatic arts."¹¹ The first board of directors of this group included Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford, Robert Lewis, Dorothy Willard, and H. William Fitelson. The Actors Studio has long been known for its association with Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), who became the artistic director in 1949 and guided the group until his death, following the tenets of the "Method" acting technique. This technique was pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) at the Moscow Art Theater where he produced the plays of Anton Chekhov and trained actors to interpret their roles from within themselves and to analyze and use their emotions naturalistically. As taught by Strasberg, the Method consists of a series of exercises designed to enable actors to draw on their own life experiences to better understand, and thus portray, dramatic characters. During the 1940s and 1950s, the Method was the predominant

characters. During the 1940s and 1950s, the Method was the predominant acting technique used in this country. Its greatest popularity coincided with the rise of naturalistic plays, but as an approach to the art of acting the Method continues to be a major influence on many actors today, no matter what their specific material.

The Actors Studio grew out of the Group Theater, an ensemble formed in 1931 under the directorship of Cheryl Crawford, Harold Clurman, and Lee Strasberg, which became known for producing socially relevant plays. They intended to emulate the Moscow Art Theater and continue Stanislavsky's teaching methods in the United States. The Group Theater's last production was in 1940. While the Group Theater's aim was to present Stanislavsky's acting techniques and production values to the public, the purpose of the Actors Studio is to provide a forum for people in the theater (including playwrights and directors as well as actors) to study and improve their craft by taking classes from seasoned members. Membership is for life, and one is invited to join after auditioning. Many well-known and highly regarded artists have studied at the Actors Studio including Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Robert De Niro, Julie Harris, Dustin Hoffman, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Susan Strasberg, Shelly Winters, Eli Wallach, and Joanne Woodward. In addition to the actors unit, the Actors Studio established a playwrights unit in 1956, a directors unit in 1960, and a production unit in 1962. The production unit was active on Broadway through the 1960s. Among its productions were a revival of Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude (Hudson Theater, 1963), James Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie (ANTA Theater, 1964), and a revival of Anton Chekhov's The Three Sisters (Morosco Theater, 1964). After Strasberg's death, he was succeeded by Studio member Ellen Burstyn as artistic director. The famous school continues to operate, using the former church building for its classrooms and maintaining and preserving the exterior.

Description

This painted brick building has one story above a raised basement. Its three bays are defined by flat brick pilasters with stone Tuscan capitals. The pilasters support a simple entablature topped by a low, undecorated pediment. In the center bay, a high stone stoop leads to an entrance with double paneled wood doors. They are topped by a paneled wood transom and a flush stone lintel. Tall windows in each of the side bays retain their original multipane, double-hung wood sash. Small, multipane wood sash windows cap each tall window and are separated from them by a small paneled stone spandrel. Above the doorway is a panel bearing the insignia of the Actors Studio, the current owner; it was originally a small window similar to those flanking it.

A stone water table distinguishes the basement from the main story. A large window opening is located on each side of the stoop, each containing paired four-over-four, double-hung wood sash windows. These and all the windows are fronted by modern metal grilles. The areaway to the east of the stoop has been paved with concrete while that to the west is planted with grass.

A doorway with a non-historic door and light is located under the stoop. The original cast- and wrought-iron railings enclose the areaway and flank the stoop up to the doorway. Sections of this fence retain the original curvilinear ornament.

To the east of the main section of the church is a small brick addition with a modern steel doorway on the ground story and a small, double-hung wood sash window above. This section was built in 1955 to house a stairway.¹² A tall wood fence spans the side yard between the church and the building to the west. A series of tall windows which originally lit the church sanctuary are visible on the western wall of the building.

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NOTES

1. On December 10, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Actors Studio (LP-1573, Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to March 11, 1986 (Item No. 8). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses at both hearings spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A letter was received from the representative of the owner which indicated that there was no opposition to designation if such a designation would not interfere with the construction of an architecturally-compatible addition to the building at the rear. As of the date of this designation no such addition has been constructed, nor have plans been filed at the Buildings Department for such an addition.
2. Rev. J.F. Richmond, New York and Its Institutions, 1609-1871, (New York, 1871), 103.
3. Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston, 1976), 220.
4. For a general history of the Presbyterian Church in New York see, Richmond, 146-148; Melton, J. Gordon, ed., "Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America," in The Encyclopedia of American Religions (Detroit, 1989), 196; and Henry W. Jessup, History of the Fifth Avenue

9-10.

5. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 742, p. 575, Jan. 20, 1858.
6. Information on the history of the church was supplied by the Department of History, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of the General Assembly, Philadelphia, PA. Copies can be found in the research files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, including Rev. Reid W. Stewart, Manual of the Associate Presbyterian Church, (Apollo, PA, 1983), 63.
7. Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (New York, 1966), 151.
8. Among the popular builders' guides of the period were those of Asher Benjamin, American Builder's Companion, several editions between 1806 and 1827, The Builder's Guide, several editions between 1839 and 1854, Elements of Architecture, two editions in 1843 and 1849, The Practical House Carpenter, several editions between 1830 and 1856, Practice of Architecture, several editions between 1833 and 1851; Minard Lafever, The Young Builder's General Instructor (1829), The Beauties of Modern Architecture, several editions between 1835 and 1855, The Modern Builder's Guide, several editions between 1833 and 1855; and Peter Nicholson, The Carpenter's New Guide, several editions between 1818 and 1867. For more detailed information see: Henry-Russell Hitchcock, American Architectural Books (Minneapolis, 1962).
9. Ada Louise Huxtable, Classic New York, Georgian Gentility to Greek Elegance, (Garden City, NY, 1964), 82-83. A similar "Bricklayer Greek" church is the Trinity Lutheran Church (1847, Avenue B at East Ninth Street) which is also a late version of this style.
10. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, foreclosure: Liber 4337, p. 24, February 8, 1945; purchase by National Amputation Foundation, Liber 4730, p. 49, May 14, 1951; purchase by Actors Studio, Liber 4917, p. 445, April 4, 1955.
11. From the school's statement of incorporation with New York State, December, 1947.
12. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits, and Dockets, ALT 2055-1955, for the Actors Studio.

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 Actors Studio (former Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church) 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 Actors Studio building is a fine and rare surviving example of a vernacular Greek Revival style building in New York City which has survived remarkably intact since its construction c. 1858, a late date for buildings of this style; that maintained by a small Associate Presbyterian church congregation for eighty-six years, the building has served since 1955 as the home of the famous Actors Studio; that the Actors Studio under its longtime artistic director Lee Strasberg has been the training ground for many of today's preeminent American actors in the technique known as the "Method"; that the well-proportioned Tuscan temple front of the building, articulated by unadorned pilasters and a low pediment, illustrates the high quality of the work of the architect-builder who, like many of the period, used pattern books to create a distinctive Greek Revival style building; and that the building is a fitting home for its famous school, the Actors Studio.

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 Actors Studio (former Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church), 432 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1053, Lot 49, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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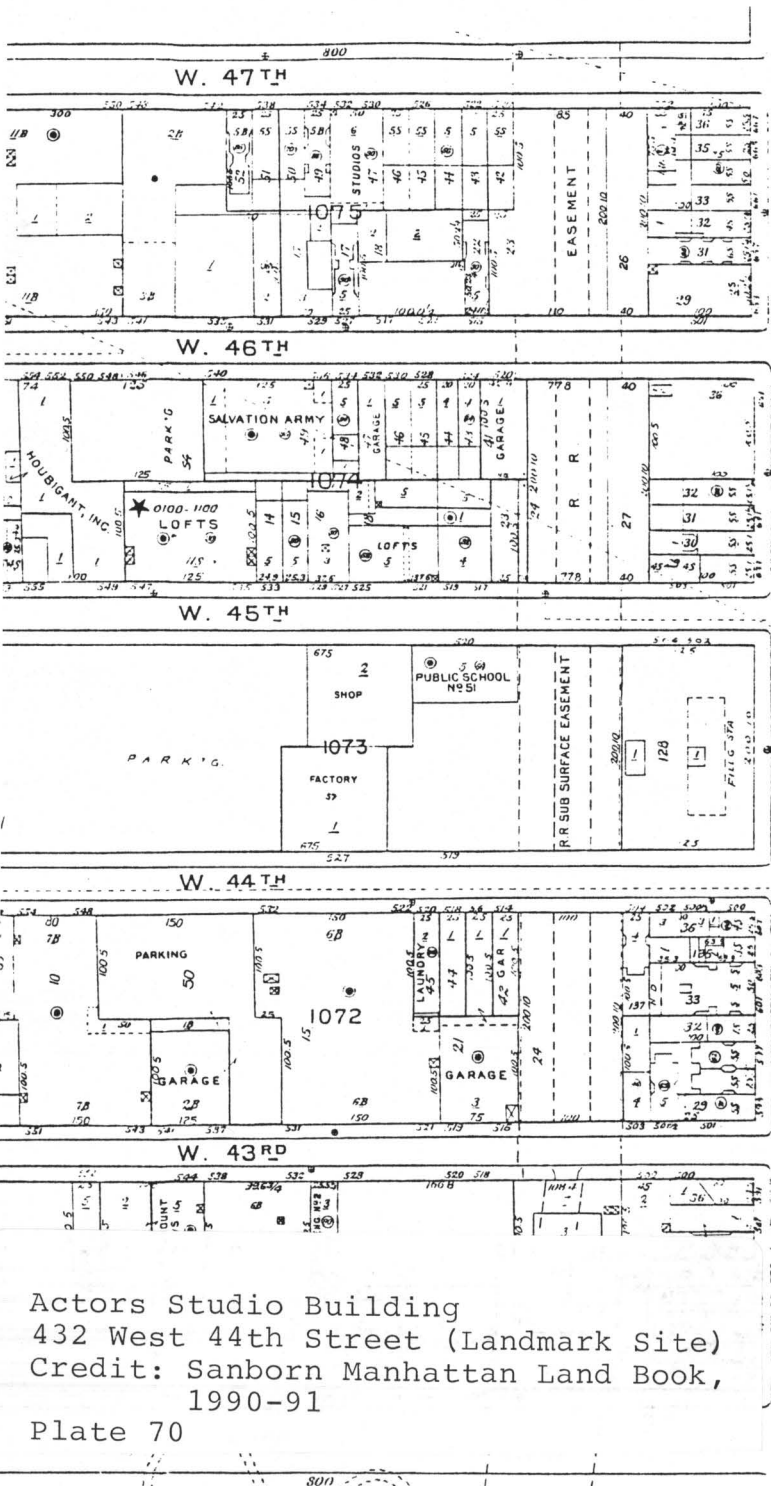
ACTORS STUDIO

Manhattan

432 West 44th Street

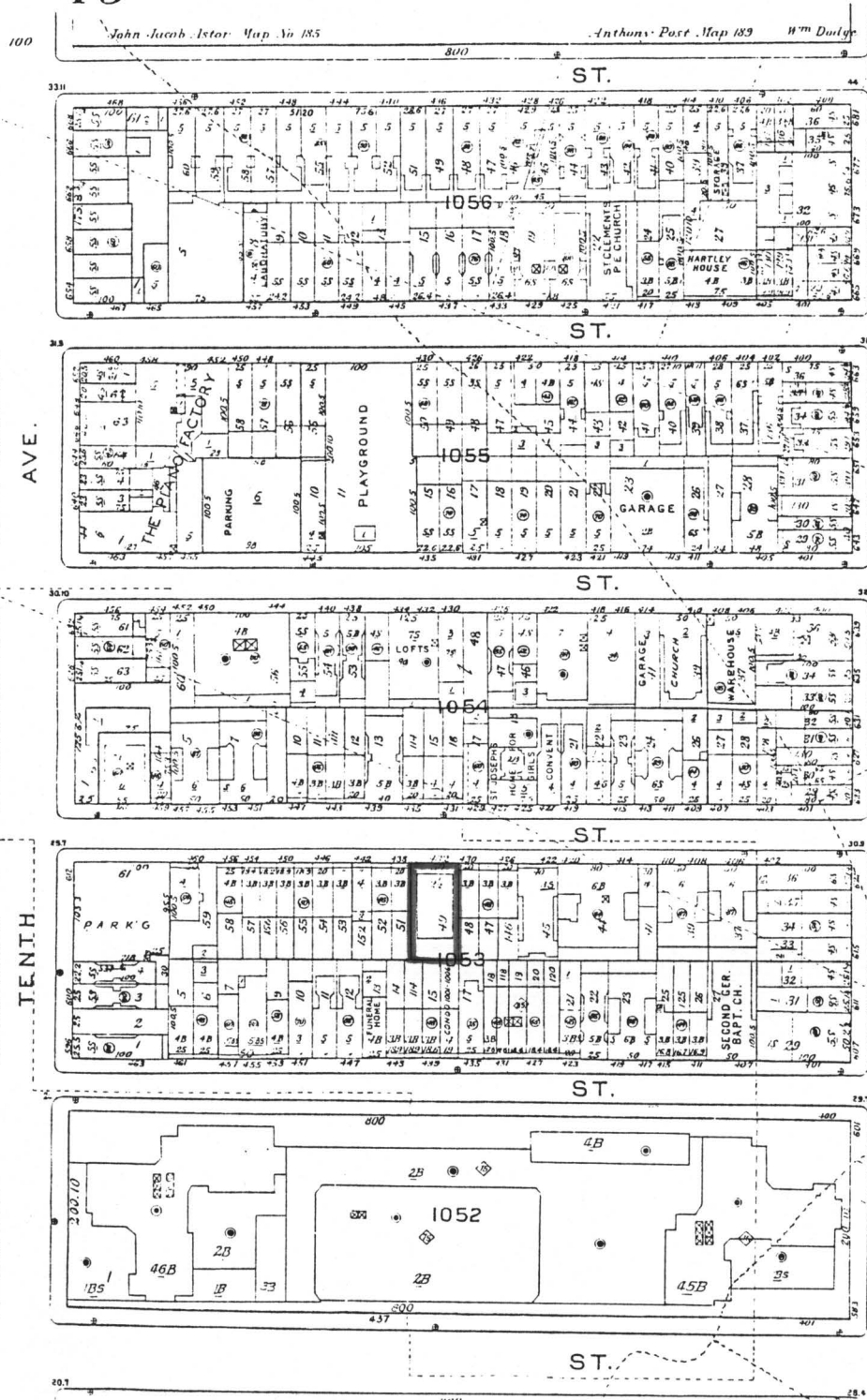
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SECTION 4

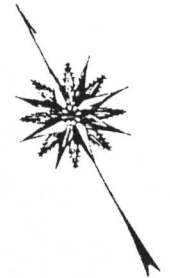
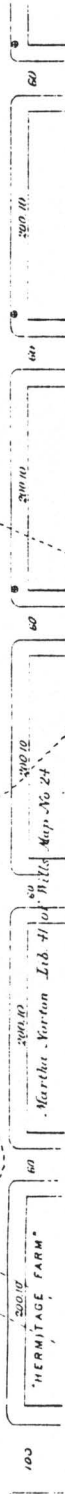


Actors Studio Building
432 West 44th Street (Landmark Site)
Credit: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book,
1990-91
Plate 70

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Map No. 24
Martha's Vinton Lib. 71 of Hills

HERMITAGE FARM