

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 30, 1998, Designation List 295
LP-1989

480 GREENWICH STREET/502 CANAL STREET HOUSE (John Y. Smith House), 480 Greenwich Street, aka 502 Canal Street, Manhattan. Built 1818-19.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 40.

On April 21, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight people, including a representative of Manhattan Community Board 1, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner's representative took no position at the public hearing.¹

Summary



The red brick double building at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill and located close to the Hudson River waterfront. It was built in 1818-19 on an irregularly-shaped corner lot at the intersection of Greenwich and Canal Streets by John Y. Smith. Smith, a manufacturer of starch and hair powder, operated his business on the ground floor and lived with his family upstairs in the building. The building retains distinctive characteristics of the Federal style, including Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window lintels and sills, and the curved bay which links the facades of the two sections at the corner. The building has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. Its presence is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Neighborhood²

The section of Canal Street on which these surviving early nineteenth-century houses are located forms part of the northern boundary of the neighborhood known since the 1970s as Tribeca (Triangle Below Canal Street).³ Much of the area was part of a land grant made in 1705 from Queen Anne to Trinity Church. A significant portion of this was leased to Leonard Lispenard as farmland and was commonly known as the Lispenard Meadows.

Trinity Church fostered residential development in the area with the establishment of St. John's Chapel in 1803 and the laying out of Hudson Square (later known as St. John's Park) between Varick, Beach, Hudson, and Laight Streets. The area around the chapel remained relatively isolated until the 1820s when Trinity further encouraged residential development by selling, rather than leasing, lots around the park and chapel. This became one of New York's most fashionable residential districts throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

Greenwich Street, laid out as "First Street" in 1761, became the main thoroughfare along the west side of the island. The City granted water lots which were gradually filled in, thus extending the shoreline into the Hudson River in the early years of the nineteenth century, which led to the establishment of Washington and West Streets, west of Greenwich Street. Canal Street was laid out in 1809, and by 1811 an eight-foot wide trench was completed down the center of the street to carry water from the Collect Pond (approximately today's Lafayette Street and Centre Street) to the Hudson River. By 1819 the trench had been covered to create a sewer, leaving Canal a broad 100-foot wide street. Greenwich Street and the area immediately to the west developed as a mixed-use district with businesses and trades-people who lived close to their work and provided services to the growing residential population to the east. By the 1820s Canal Street for much of its length had become a thriving retail district.⁴

The appeal of the neighborhood surrounding St. John's Chapel as a fashionable residential district was short lived, and the area became increasingly commercial. In 1867, Trinity Church sold the park, and St. John's Freight Terminal was built on the site, contributing to the evolution of the area, as numerous warehouse buildings replaced the low-scale residential and commercial structures. The city's first elevated train line opened along

Greenwich Street in 1878 somewhat isolating the blocks to the west. St. John's Chapel itself was torn down in 1918 for the widening of Varick Street. The construction of the Holland Tunnel in the 1920s and the construction of the exit plaza on the site of St. John's Freight Terminal increased trucking traffic to the neighborhood. Nonetheless, early nineteenth-century structures like those at Canal and Greenwich survived, in part because they remained viable for commercial and residential use, and in part because this block was located northwest of the access points to the Holland Tunnel.

Federal Style Buildings⁵

The building at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street and the three neighboring buildings to the west are rare surviving structures from the early nineteenth century. The rapid growth of the city in those years led to the subdivision and sale of large plots of land and the construction of groups and rows of brick houses and shops to meet the needs of the population. The architectural style of such buildings has been called Federal, after the new republic, but in form and detail the style bears similarities to the contemporaneous Regency style of Great Britain. Buildings in the style were constructed throughout the city, from the tip of lower Manhattan as far north as 14th Street, beginning in the 1790s through the 1820s.

In elevation and plan, Federal style buildings were simple, especially earlier in the nineteenth century. Two or three stories high with an additional half story under a sloping roof and three bays wide, houses were of load-bearing masonry construction or modified timber-frame construction with masonry cladding. Brick facades were laid in the Flemish bond pattern, which alternated a stretcher and a header in every row. This system allowed the linking of the more expensive face brick with the cheaper, rougher brick behind. Walls were usually two "wythes," or eight inches, thick. Because brick was fabricated by hand in molds rather than by machine before it was fired, it was relatively porous. Thus to protect the brick surface and slow water penetration, facades were painted red or gray, and mortar lines were delineated in white.

Federal style buildings were generally of modest proportions with an almost planar smoothness. Facades were ornamented with flat or incised lintels of brownstone or marble above the windows; plain wooden box cornices concealed gutters. Roofs were steeply pitched, and residential structures usually

had wooden dormers. The most ornamental feature of a building was the doorway, often framed with columns and topped with a rectangular transom or fanlight. In residential structures the formal entrance was approached by a stoop -- a flight of brownstone steps placed to one side of the facade, which created a basement level below the parlor floor. Commercial structures retained the simple detailing but with minor variations. The raised entry was usually eliminated in favor of a ground story entrance which provided access to residential accommodations at the upper stories and a ground story shop for customer convenience.

Owners or lessees of property typically would subdivide a large lot, then hire local carpenters or masons to construct several buildings in a group or row. Then these would be sold or leased. With the increasing availability of pattern books such as Asher Benjamin's *American Builders Companion* (published in six editions between 1806 and 1827), local builders had access to drawings and instructions for exterior and interior plans and details.

The Building at 480 Greenwich/502 Canal Street and its History

Portions of the Lispenard Meadow, including the area at Canal Street and Greenwich Street, were inherited by Lispenard's daughter Sarah and her husband Alexander L. Stewart. In 1818, the same year that work commenced on covering Canal Street, Stewart deeded an irregularly-shaped lot with a skewed corner at the intersection of Canal and Greenwich to John Y. Smith, and during that year Smith began construction of a double building with major facades on Canal and Greenwich which meet in a distinctive curved corner.⁶ An interior brick wall dividing the two sections of the building is placed on the Greenwich Street side next to the curved corner. The design incorporated ground story shops on each street front and provided for living accommodations at the upper stories. It is believed that the building had a peaked roof, probably with slopes on each side that joined above the corner bay. Smith, a manufacturer of starch and hair powder, operated his business from and lived in the building with his family until 1829. That year the building and the adjacent parcel on Canal Street (the site of 504 Canal), which was still vacant and being used as a side yard for the corner building, was transferred to Alonzo Alvord, owner of a hat store on the Bowery.⁷ The building had first been given an address number in the 1827 tax assessment (478 Greenwich Street), the year the latter Edward

Pew opened a shop in the building.⁸ It was identified for the first time as 480 Greenwich in the 1852 tax assessment, and by the early 1890s, 502 Canal Street was being used for the portion of the building facing Canal Street. Alexander Stewart reacquired the property in 1836, selling the house [480 Greenwich/502 Canal], but not the vacant parcel [504 Canal], the following year to Florence Riley. Riley, a tailor, apparently maintained her business here.⁹ By 1859 it had been sold to Rolph [sic] Marsh;¹⁰ his estate sold the property in 1909 to Samuel Weil who had previously acquired the adjacent buildings at 504 and 506 Canal Street.¹¹ Since Weil's ownership, these three properties always have been held by the same owner.

No. 480/502 has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. Existing records do not specify all the commercial tenants, but based on the evidence of photographs and insurance atlases, they have included a drugstore, a lunch counter, and a liquor store. Both the storefronts and the building entrances have been changed over time to accommodate the needs of the various occupants. It appears that the peaked roof was removed either during Weil's ownership or that of George Hayunga, the subsequent owner (who acquired the property in 1920). After the original roof was removed, the large frames for billboards were installed on the new flat roof.¹² At some point in the twentieth century, interior fire doors were installed in the wall between the 502 Canal Street section of the building and the building adjacent at 504 Canal Street.¹³

Description

This three-story double building occupies an irregularly-shaped corner lot with a 30-foot front facing Greenwich Street and a 24-foot front facing Canal Street. The building is two bays wide on Greenwich Street, and three bays wide on Canal Street with a two-bay rounded corner linking the two facades. All facades are laid in Flemish bond brick and topped with a plain metal gutter above a metal flashing. Originally the gutter would have been enclosed in a wooden box cornice. Framework for two billboards is placed on the roof.¹⁴

The Greenwich Street facade has an entrance which provides access to the upper floors through a doorway on the left. The door has a wooden surround and transom with a brownstone lintel above. The twentieth-century storefront includes a central window and door with wooden surround. The window and storefront door are topped by metal housings for roll down gates. Both the second and

third stories have two symmetrically placed window openings. The window openings have plain brownstone sills and lintels, with non-historic double-hung sash. Brick has been removed between the two window openings on each story for the insertion of air conditioning units.

The two-bay rounded corner has a stuccoed storefront (painted) with a window on Greenwich Street and a shop entrance on Canal Street. Both are topped by metal housings for roll down gates. A curved, paneled stone lintel (now painted) is placed above the housing at the shop entrance. Symmetrically placed window openings on the second and third stories have plain brownstone sills and lintels. New window sash were being installed at the time of designation. An illuminated sign, which appears to date from the 1940s, is suspended

from a bracket placed adjacent to the second-story window in the second bay.

The Canal Street facade has a stuccoed twentieth-century storefront (painted) with a window placed to the left. A doorway on the right provides access to the upper stories. Both are topped by metal housings for roll down gates. Three concrete steps lead to the doorway. At the second and third stories the symmetrically placed window openings have plain brownstone lintels and sills. (Window sash is being replaced.)

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Notes

1. The Commission had previously held public hearings on this item in 1985 (LP-1441 and 1442) and in 1989 (LP-1721), but took no action on the proposed designation.
2. The history of the Tribeca neighborhood was compiled from the following sources: Andrew S. Dolkart, *The Texture of Tribeca* (New York: Enterprise Press, 1989); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Tribeca North Historic District Designation Report*, LP-1714 (New York: City of New York, 1992).
3. Tribeca is bounded by Canal Street on the north, Lafayette Street and Broadway on the east, Vesey Street on the south, and the Hudson River on the west.
4. I.N. Phelps Stokes, ed. *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1928), VI, 396-397. See VI, "Index," 591, for more detailed citations on early history of Canal Street.
5. The history of the Federal style building was compiled from the following sources: Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989); Ada Louis Huxtable, *The Architecture of New York: Classic New York Georgian Gentility to Greek Elegance* (Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Books, 1964); Charles Lockwood, *Bricks and Brownstone: The New York Rowhouse, 1783-1929, an Architectural and Social History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972); Montgomery Schuyler, "The Small City House in New York," *Architectural Record* (April-June, 1899), 357-388.
6. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 128, page 471, recorded July 11, 1818, and Liber 133, page 580, recorded Feb. 15, 1819. New York City [Manhattan], Tax Assessments, 5th Ward. In 1818 Smith's property was assessed at \$1500 for a lot and foundation. In 1819, the assessment was \$3000 for a double house and lot.
7. Liber 254, page 554, recorded Oct. 3, 1829.
8. For occupancy, see New York City Directories, 1824-1830
9. See Liber 354, page 593, recorded June 10, 1836; Liber 380, page 155, recorded Sept. 15, 1837; Liber 383, page 364, recorded Feb. 2, 1838. Tax Assessment, 5th Ward, 1839-1856.
10. Liber 778, page 475, recorded April 30, 1859. In 1859, Marsh was assessed for three stores and a double house at 480 Greenwich.

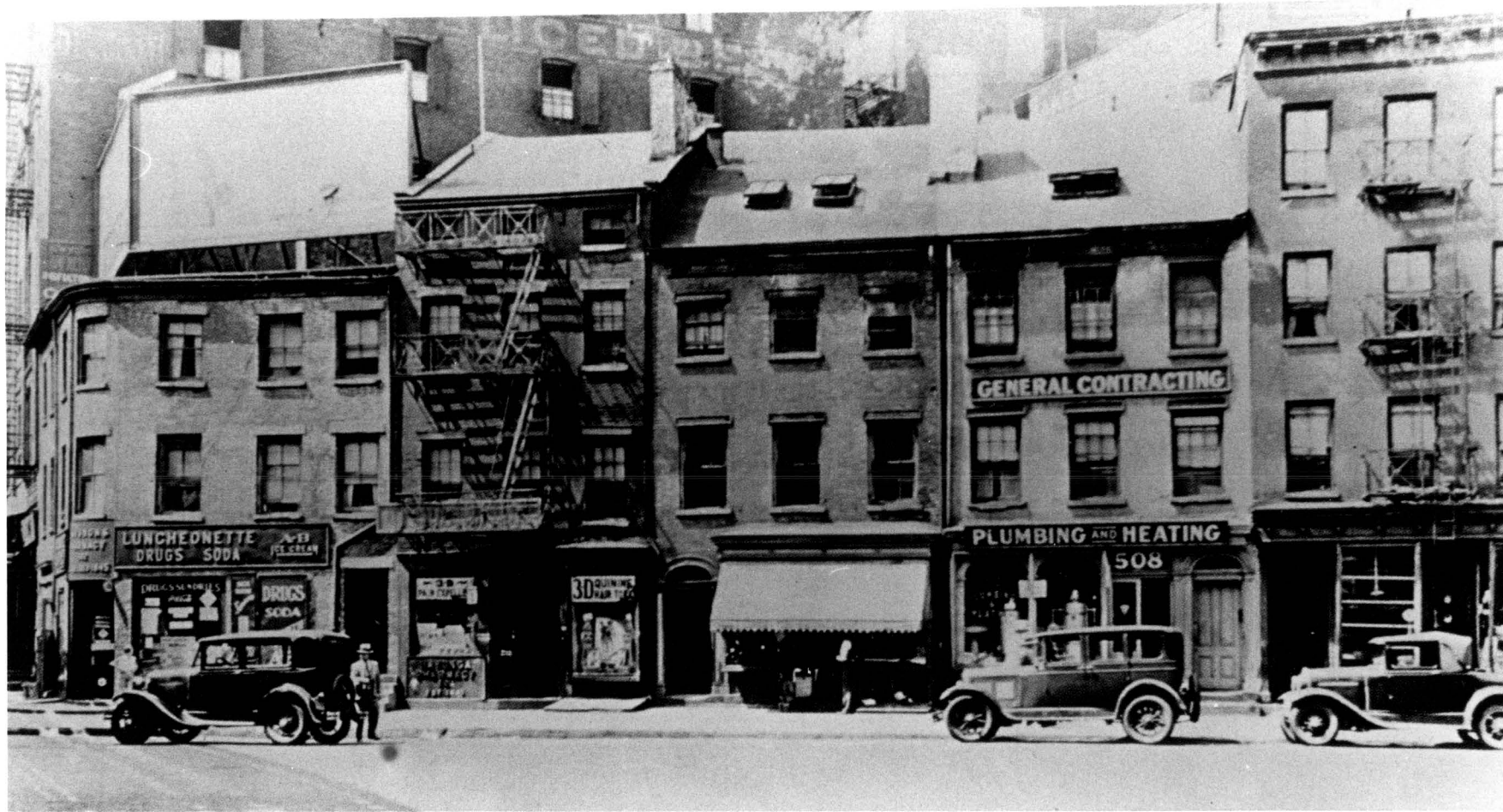
11. Section 1, Liber 52, pages 368 and 368, recorded June 3, 1897, for lot 39 (506 Canal); Section 1, Liber 173, page 312, recorded July 25, 1907, for lot 38 (506 Canal); Section 1, Liber 186, page 331, recorded Jan. 11, 1909.
12. As seen in photographs taken in 1927, 1929, and 1931 by P.L. Sperr in the collection of the New York Public Library. See *Photographic Views of New York City* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1981), Fiche 0765, A4,A5,A6. It is also shown in Department of Finance Tax Photos, Manhattan for Block 595, Lot 40 (1939/40).
13. *Insurance Maps of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan* (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1922, updated 1992), vol. 1N, plate 63.
14. The Landmarks Preservation Commission has issued a Notice of Review (NOR 98-6085) for alteration and restoration work on the building. This will include replacement of storefronts, window sash, construction of a new cornice, and removal of through-wall air conditioning units and repair of the brickwork.

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 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street House (John Y. Smith House) has a special character, and 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 red brick double building at 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan, on a block partially created on landfill and located close to the Hudson River waterfront; that it was built in 1818-19 by John Y. Smith, a manufacturer of starch and hair powder, who operated his business on the ground floor and lived with his family upstairs in the building; that the building retains distinctive characteristics of the Federal style, including Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window lintels and sills, and the curved bay which links the facades of the two sections at the corner; and the presence of 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 480 Greenwich Street/502 Canal Street House (John Y. Smith House), 480 Greenwich Street, aka 502 Canal Street, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 40, as its Landmark Site.



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photo: Photographic Views of New York City, New York Public Library
P. L. Sperr, 1931



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photo by: John Barrington Bayley, 1965



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan



480 Greenwich Street (aka 502 Canal Street), 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photos by: Carl Forster, 1998



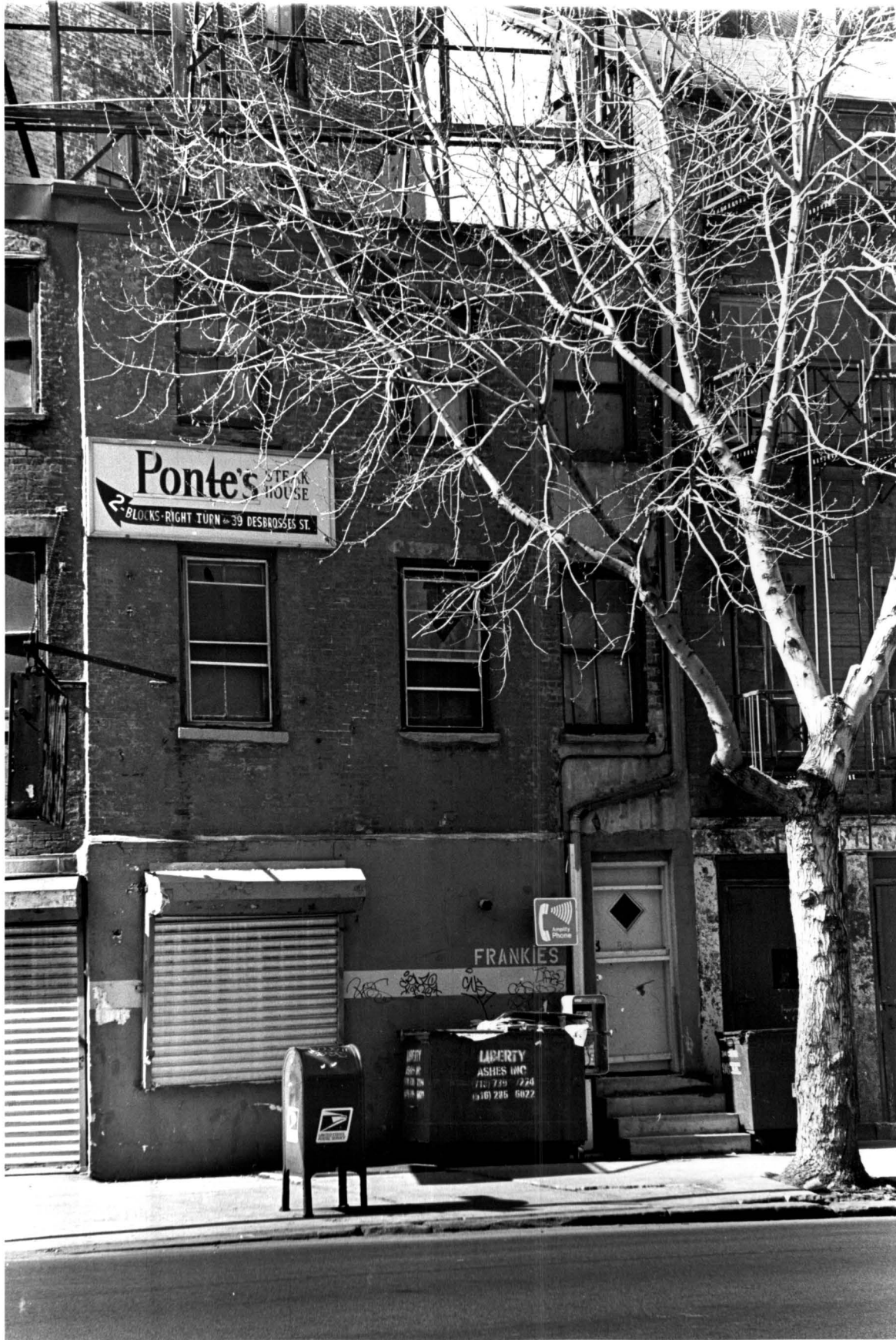
480 Greenwich Street/ 502 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Greenwich Street facade
Photo by: Carl Forster, March, 1998



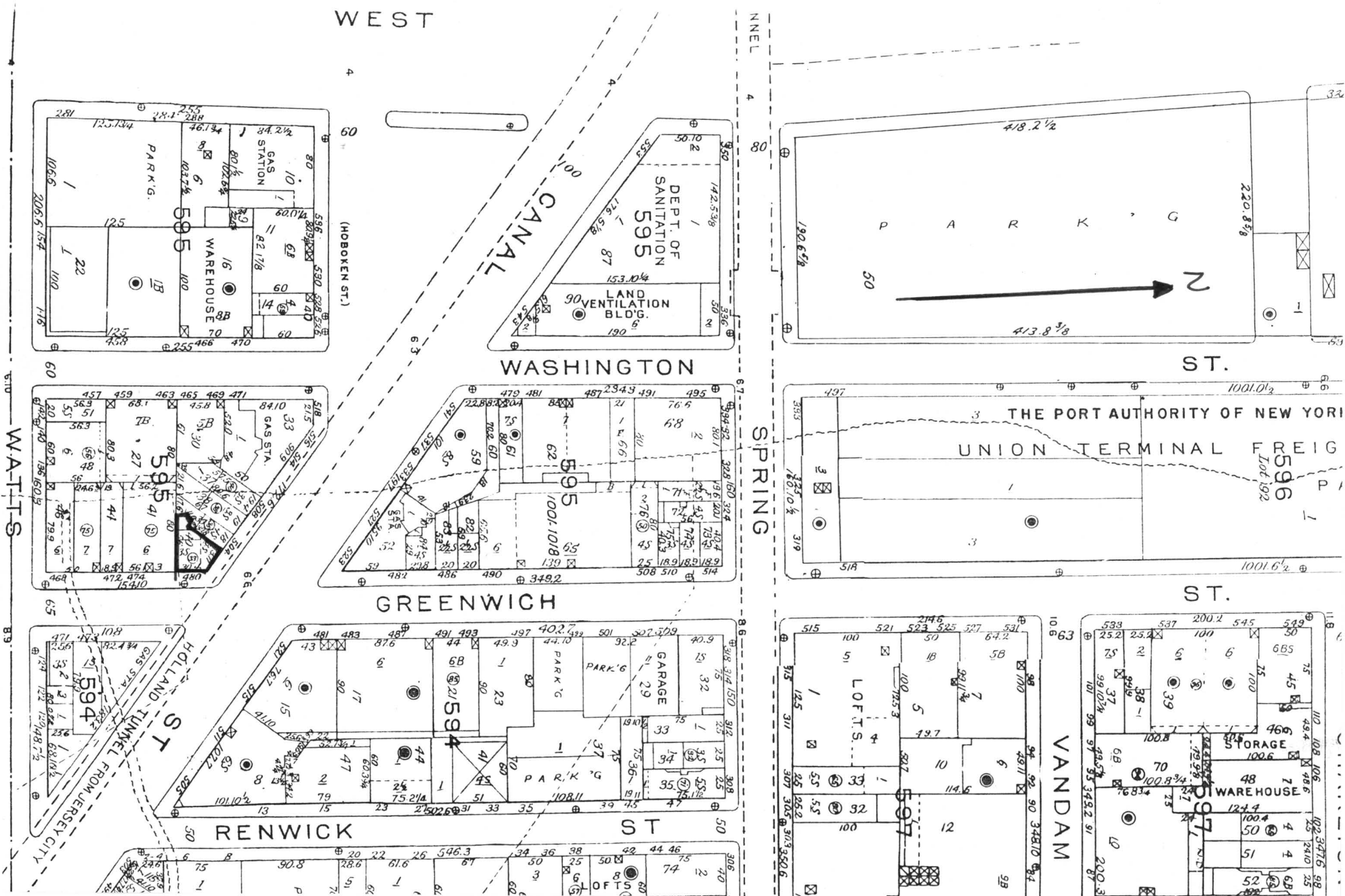
480 Greenwich Street/ 502 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Greenwich Street facade
Photo by: Carl Forster, June, 1998



480 Greenwich Street/ 502 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Corner section of facade
Photo by: Carl Forster, June, 1998



480 Greenwich Street/ 502 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Canal Street facade
Photo by: Carl Forster, March, 1998



480 Greenwich Street/ 502 Canal Street House, Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 40
 Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1997-98, Plate 21

