

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 30, 1998, Designation List 295
LP-1992

508 CANAL STREET HOUSE, 508 Canal Street, Manhattan. Built 1826.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 37.

On April 21, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 508 Canal Street House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). 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 owners have expressed their support for this designation.¹

Summary

The brick building at 508 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill located close to the Hudson River waterfront. It was built in 1826 with the adjacent house at 506 Canal Street on a midblock site between Greenwich and Washington Streets by John G. Rohr. Rohr, a merchant tailor, developed several properties on both sides of Canal Street and had his business in a building at the northwest corner of Canal and Greenwich. The building at 508 Canal Street retains distinctive characteristics of the Federal style, including the Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window sills, and the peaked roof. It has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. The presence of 508 Canal Street 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 508 Canal Street and the three neighboring buildings to the east are rare surviving structures from the early nineteenth century. The rapid growth of the city in these 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 508 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. On January 1, 1826, Stewart deeded a parcel of land midblock on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich Street and Washington Street to John G. Rohr, who began construction of the two three-story houses at 506 and 508 Canal Street.⁶ (He was also developing a parcel immediately to the west with three additional houses, which do not survive.) The design of No. 508 Canal incorporated a ground-story shop set behind an unusual cast-iron storefront with paneled pilasters supporting semi-elliptical arches which repeated the form of the arch above the entranceway. This ground-story shopfront matched a cast-iron shopfront at 506 Canal Street. (The shopfront of No. 508 was removed in 1941.) The window lintels (which are still extant) were also of paneled cast iron. The source of the ironwork is not known.⁷ Living accommodations were provided at the upper stories which were reached from a staircase set inside the entranceway at the east side of the facade. It is not known if the peaked attic roof originally had dormers or hatchways.

Rohr was a merchant tailor who appeared in city directories beginning in 1825-26, listed at Greenwich at the corner of Canal. (By 1832, his business address was specified as 482 Greenwich at

the corner of Canal. This would place the business on the north side of Canal, instead of the building on the south side which today has the address of 480 Greenwich/502 Canal.) The building was first given an address number in the 1826 tax assessment and was identified as 241 Canal Street. (It became known by the address of 508 Canal Street in 1860.) According to directory listings, it was first occupied in 1826 by Moses S. Phillips, whose business address was at 196 Front Street. James H. Greenfield operated a china store in the building for two or three years, beginning in 1829, while Roderick Sedgwick, a merchant with a business address at 39 Front Street, was living upstairs.⁸ Rohr sold 241 [508] Canal Street in 1840 to Joseph Batby.

According to the 1850 census, Batby was a 46-year old French-born ivory turner who lived in the house with his wife Sarah and four children, including a 16-year old son Anthony who worked as a jeweler. Three other families lived in the building: that of French-born George H. Denot, his wife Maria, and two boarders; that of Irish-born James Sinnot, a stone-cutter, his wife Mary, daughter Catherine, and mother-in-law Mary Kennedy; and that of John and Catherine Flaherty. Batby's heirs sold the building in 1870.⁹ When Matthew Thompson acquired the property in 1882, he filed an application for an alteration permit to extend the building at the rear, covering the remainder of the irregularly shaped lot with a one-story workshop space, lit by three skylights.¹⁰ It is possible that the windows at the third story were raised in height at the same time.

The building 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 contracting and plumbing business and a restaurant. The original cast-iron storefront and arched entranceway were removed when the first story was converted for restaurant use.¹¹ At that time the first story was refaced in brick, laid in Flemish bond, up to the base of the window sills at the second story, and new window and door openings were created.

Description

This three-story building occupies a nineteen-foot wide midblock lot on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich Street and Washington Street. It is three bays wide with a facade laid up in Flemish bond brickwork, which has been painted.

The sloping attic roof is covered with asphalt shingles and is punctuated by two hatchways placed near the ridgeline of the roof. (Historic photos show one centered hatchway placed closer to the front of the roof slope.) A large chimney (which has been cut down from its original height) is placed at the west along the line of the party wall that No. 508 Canal shares with No. 506 Canal. The stepped brick party wall which No. 508 once shared with No. 510 Canal Street (demolished in the 1930s)¹² rises above the roof slope at the west. The western elevation of this wall is almost completely visible and is pierced by several window openings at the attic level.

The first story largely retains its appearance from the 1941 alteration, when it was rebuilt in brick, laid up in Flemish bond (now painted). An entranceway with paired wood and glass doors set below a transom is located at the west. This is approached by a single concrete step. A large square window opening at the east contains multi-paned sash of iron and glass. A sloping cloth canopy spans the facade at the base of the second

story window sills. The base of the party wall at the west is fronted with a cast-iron pier, which survives from the storefront of the demolished No. 510 Canal Street. A sidewalk hatchway, covered with iron doors, provides access to the cellar.

The second and third stories each have three symmetrically placed window openings with brownstone sills and paneled cast-iron lintels. The window sash in both stories is double-hung six-over-six set behind aluminum storm sash. A metal gutter, which would have originally been enclosed within a box cornice, spans the facade below the roof and leads to a drainpipe at the east edge of the facade.

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Notes

1. The Commission had previously held public hearings on this item in 1985 (LP-1445) and in 1989 (LP-1724), 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 204, page 32, recorded March 30, 1926. New York City [Manhattan], Tax Assessments, 5th Ward. In 1825 Alexander Stewart was assessed for a lot valued at \$700. In 1826, John G. Rohr was assessed for a house and lot valued at \$2000 located at 241 Canal Street.
7. It is possible that the storefront and window lintels were imported from England. However, New York City was beginning to establish foundries for the fabrication of cast iron in the 1820s. See advertisement

in *Longworth's Real Estate Directory for 1826-27* (New York, 1827): "Iron Foundry, No. 22 and 24 Elm Street, Henry Warrall makes castings of the best kinds of iron for door frames and arches, back and jambs for fireplaces, sash weights, 50 lbs., 25 lbs., and all other weights."

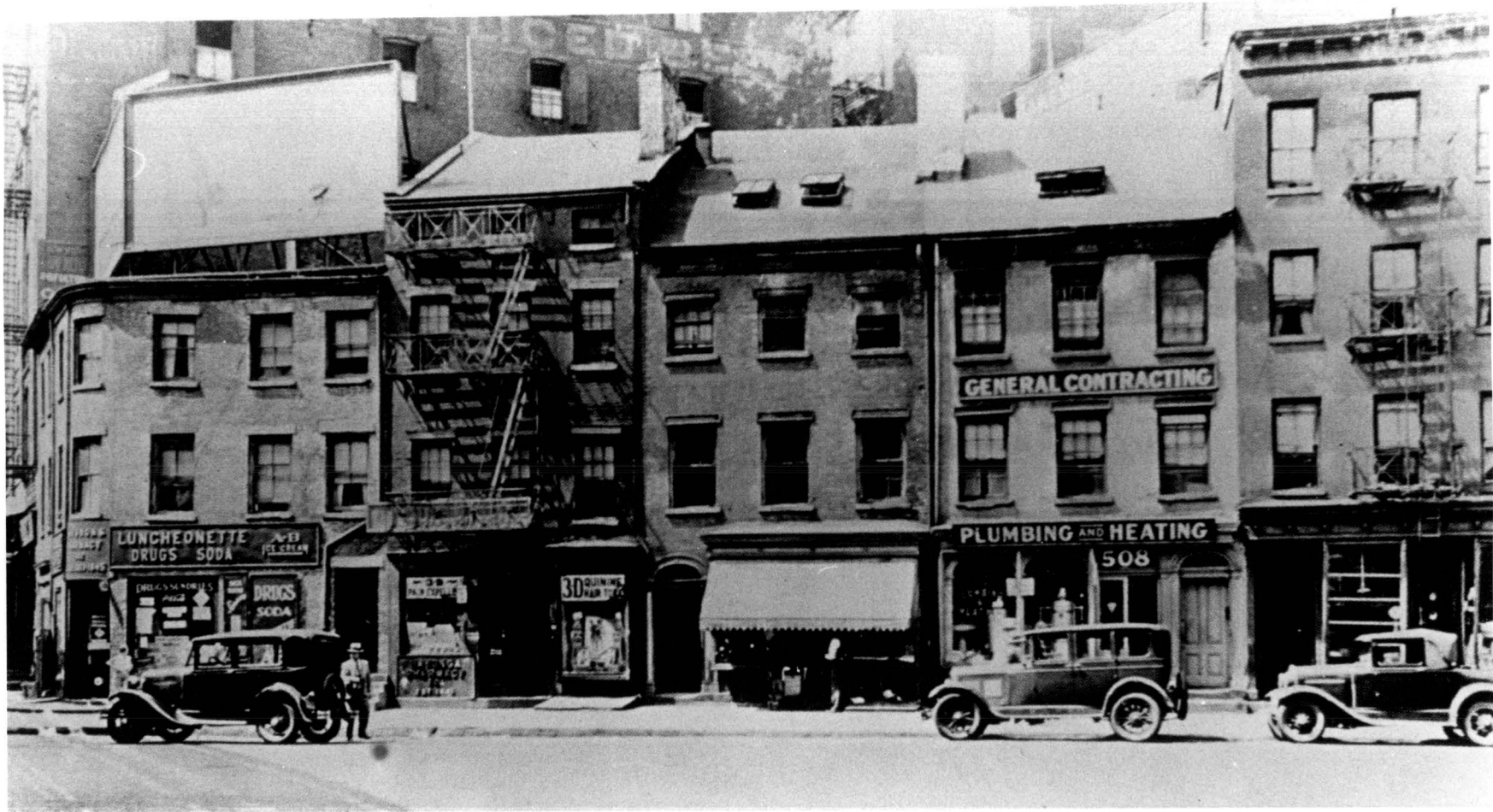
8. In 1830 Rohr himself and his wife Rebecca moved into 239 [506] Canal Street. In 1827-29, they had lived at 243 [510] Canal, another of the properties Rohr had developed. Rohr and his family remained in the house at 239 [506] until 1853, retaining the tailoring business in a building on the north side of Canal Street.
9. Liber 1139, page 321, recorded April 27, 1870.
10. Liber 1644, page 356, recorded March 23, 1882; New York City, Dept. of Buildings, Manhattan, Alt. 550-1882.
11. See Robert G. Josephs, "A Discussion of the Canal Street House and the Period of Federal Style Architecture in New York City," Landmarks Scholars Program, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1976, unpublished typescript, 24-25. Current Dept. of Buildings records list permit no. 2747 for plumbing and permit no. 3929 for structural lintels, both dated 1941, without details. The building with the original storefront awning is 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, C7. See also Department of Finance Tax Photos, Manhattan for Block 595, Lots 37 and 38 (1939/40).
12. The nineteenth-century building at No. 510 is shown in the Sperr photos, but has been demolished by the time that the tax photos were taken.

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 508 Canal Street 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 brick building at 508 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill located close to the Hudson River waterfront; that it was built in 1826 with the adjacent house at 506 Canal Street by John G. Rohr, a merchant tailor, who developed several properties on both sides of Canal Street and had his business in a building at the northwest corner of Canal and Greenwich; that the building retains distinctive characteristics of Federal style, including the Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window sills, and peaked roof; and that the presence of 508 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 508 Canal Street House, 508 Canal Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 37, 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

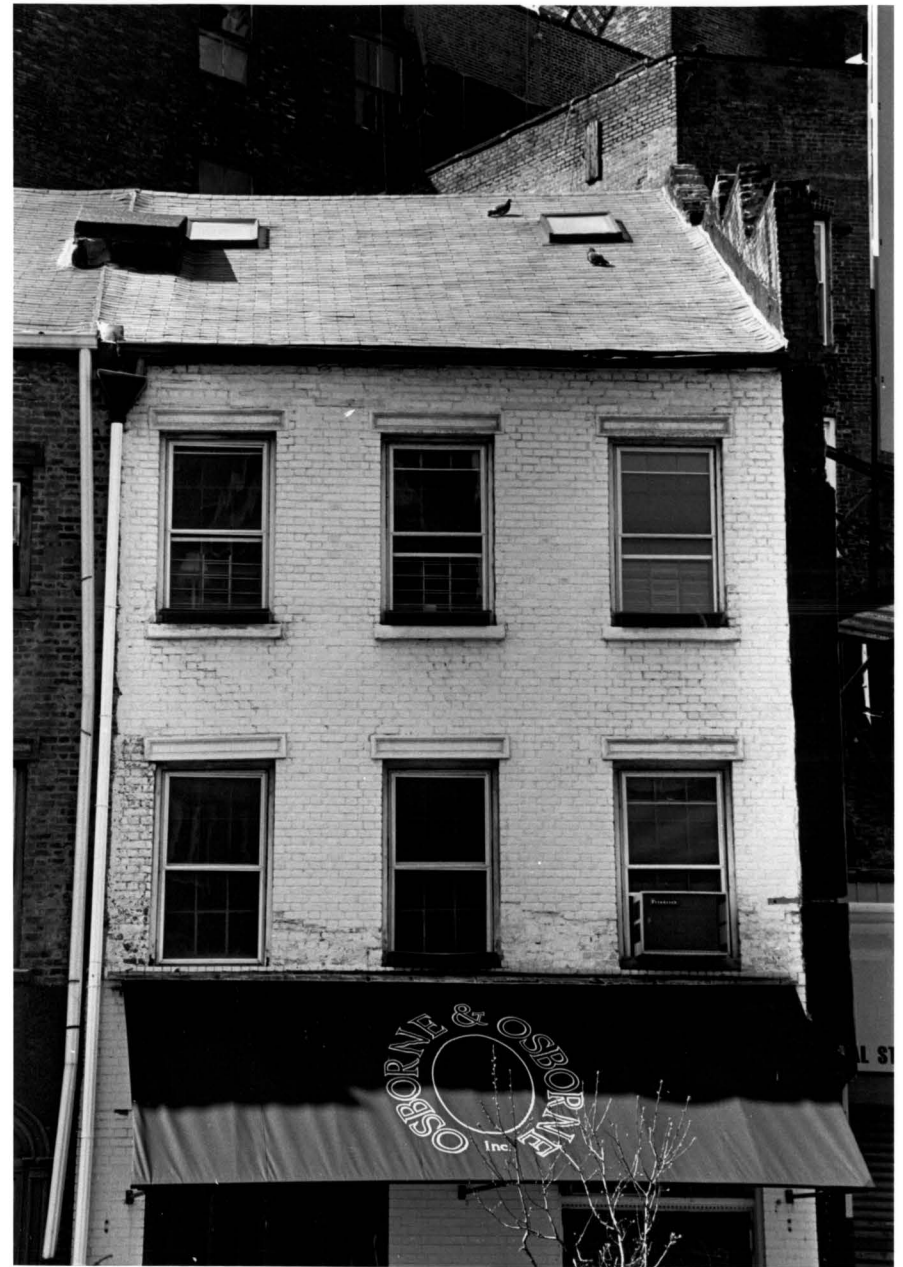


508 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Photo by: Carl Forster, 1998



508 Canal Street House, Manhattan

Photo by: David Bishop, 1975



Upper story details
Photo by: Carl Forster, 1998

