

NICHOLAS C. AND AGNES BENZIGER HOUSE, 345 Edgecombe Avenue (aka 345-351 Edgecombe Avenue), Manhattan. Built 1890-91; William Schickel, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2054, Lot 1.

On December 15, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses, including two representatives of the building's owner, the Broadway Housing Development Fund Company; a former tenant; a member of Manhattan Community Board 9; and a representative of the Historic Districts Council, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to this designation.



Summary

The Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House is one of Harlem's last remaining freestanding mansions. Benziger, a Swiss emigré, was a successful publisher, manufacturer, and importer of books and articles used in Catholic worship. Designed by William Schickel, a prominent German-born architect, the house was built in 1890-91, when many picturesque villas were constructed along the eastern ridge of lower Washington Heights, overlooking the Bronx and the Harlem plain. The building's eclectic style incorporates mostly medieval forms inspired by central European sources. Among the design's most notable features are the flared mansard roof, pierced by numerous gabled dormers, and the facade's richly-colored ironspot brickwork. In 1920, Dr. Henry W. Lloyd converted the house into a hospital. After World War II, a nursery school occupied the building, and later, it was used as a hotel. Since 1989, it has been owned by the Broadway Housing Development Fund Company, a non-profit organization providing permanent housing for formerly homeless adults. Despite some alterations and additions to the exterior over the past century, much of the original historic fabric and landscape surrounding the house remains intact.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Development of Lower Washington Heights

Annexed to New York City in 1873, Harlem developed much of its current residential character during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With elevated rail lines serving Second, Third and Eighth Avenues by 1880, the long blocks of central Harlem quickly filled with speculatively-built rowhouses, such as those found in the Mount Morris Park Historic District. Change, however, came more gradually to the west, particularly on the steep cliffs of Harlem Heights.

For the generation that celebrated the centennial in 1889 of George Washington's inauguration as the nation's first president, Harlem Heights held strong associations with the past. Not only had several significant battles been fought in the area during the American Revolution, but several estates erected during the era remained standing, including the Roger and Mary Philipse Morris House/Morris-Jumel Mansion (West 160th Street at Edgecombe Avenue, 1765; remodeled, c. 1810, a designated New York City Landmark), which briefly served as General Washington's military headquarters during 1776; and The Grange, home to the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton (presently at 287 Convent Avenue, John McComb, Jr., 1801-02, a designated New York City Landmark).

During the early 1890s, the area between West 145th and 155th Streets was commonly called Washington Heights. Unlike central Harlem, it had the character of a remote country village, popular with downtowners for its "bracing air and picturesque scenery."¹ While some city residents raced their trotters up Harlem Lane (now St. Nicholas Avenue) to the Harlem River Speedway, others enjoyed quieter pleasures at the New York Tennis Club, at 148th Street and Tenth Avenue, or at the Atheneum, a building devoted to "dancing and other social amusements."² In 1906, Charles Henry White recalled how the area had been a "rural retreat," claiming its "chief charm [was] its well-bred seclusion."³

Transportation played a key role in the residential development of Washington Heights. In the late 1880s, a cable street railway was installed on Tenth (now Amsterdam) Avenue between 125th and 155th Streets, providing a much-needed transit link to the downtown commercial district. Not only had most streets been paved by this time, but with the support of the Washington Heights Taxpayers Association and other civic-minded groups, the city announced plans to construct an iron viaduct at West

155th Street linking the proposed Central (now Macomb's Dam) Bridge with St. Nicholas Place (the viaduct and the bridge are a designated New York City Landmark). This ambitious scheme was designed to improve vehicular circulation, connecting the Bronx to Harlem and the Upper West Side. A contemporary reporter observed:

. . . the new viaduct will make a great change for the better . . . It means almost everything for the future . . . the effect of the new viaduct will certainly be seen in improved values in vacant property and in increased building.⁴

Real estate interest in Washington Heights, consequently, surged around 1890 -- especially on lots close to the planned viaduct. Not only would future residents enjoy uninterrupted views toward the Bronx and as far as the Long Island Sound, but it was commonly believed there were additional health benefits as well.

It is common for real estate brokers to place stress upon the healthiness of a house which is located on high ground . . . If, then, a locality is to be commended for its altitude, the property included in Washington Heights should be of exceeding value for residence purposes, for no higher ground exists anywhere in New York City.⁵

A block-by-block survey published in *The Real Estate Record and Guide* concluded that there was "probably no finer residence section on the Heights than St. Nicholas Avenue and St. Nicholas Place, between 145th and 155th Street."⁶ Period photographs support this view, documenting wide tree-lined streets punctuated with impressive freestanding mansions. Several picturesque examples survive along St. Nicholas Place, including No. 6, built for the yeast manufacturer Jacob P. Baiter in 1893-95 (Theodore G. Stein, now part of the Dawn Hotel); No. 10, commissioned by circus impresario James A. Bailey in 1886-88 (Samuel B. Reed, a designated New York City Landmark); as well as a pair of attached stone and shingle villas at Nos. 12 and 14, built circa 1883.

On March 5, 1890, the Benzigers entered into an agreement with James and Ella Montieth to purchase a sixty-two by one hundred foot lot at the northwest corner of West 150th Street and Edgecombe Avenue.⁷ At the time of the purchase, few vacant lots were available and the family paid a

premium for the site -- \$32,000.⁸ As part of the sale, the Benzigers agreed to spend \$750 on various site improvements, such as installing curbs and building sidewalks. Lastly, the Benzigers promised the house would be a "first class dwelling" and that it would be used for no other purpose for a period of twenty years.⁹

Nicholas C. Benziger (1859-1925)¹⁰

Nicholas C. Benziger was a successful publisher, manufacturer, and importer of religious books and articles related to Catholic worship. Benziger Brothers had its origins in Einsiedeln, a monastic center in the mountains south of Zurich, Switzerland. Here in 1792, Joseph Charles Benziger (1762-1841) founded a small business selling crosses and other religious souvenirs. During the early 1830s, his sons, Charles (d. 1873) and Nicholas (d. 1864), expanded the firm's operations to focus on the sale of devotional books and other printed materials. A New York City branch was established in 1853, under the direction of Charles' son, J. N. Adelrich Benziger, and Louis C. Benziger.

Following the death of J. N. Adelrich in 1878, Louis asked his 19-year-old nephew, Nicholas, to join him as partner in the New York office. He accepted the offer and immigrated to the United States in 1880. Business prospered, the firm established stores in Cincinnati and Chicago, a bronze studio in Brooklyn, and a marble studio in Pietrasanta, Italy. A wide range of religious books were sold, emphasizing Catholic educational, theological, and devotional subjects. At an international exposition of church goods and publications held at the Vatican in the late 1880s, their display was awarded "The Diploma of Honor, The Highest Reward Granted," permitting Benziger Brothers to use the title of "Pontifical Institute of Christian Art" in publicity materials. The firm also served as exclusive agents for such decorative arts workshops as Froc-Robert statuary in Paris and F.X. Zettler stained glass in Munich. Following the death of Louis C. Benziger in 1896, the American branch became independent of the original Swiss firm.

Nicholas returned to Switzerland in 1883 and married Agnes Stoffel. The Benzigers had five children. Except for the eldest son Xavier, who was born in 1889, Anna, Bernard, Rosalie and Alfred were born while the family resided at 345 Edgecombe Avenue. The three sons followed in their father's professional footsteps, joining the company as partners in 1912, 1919, and 1923. Bernard C. Benziger, son of Bernard, sold the firm to Crowell Collier Macmillan in 1968. Today, the

Benziger Publishing Company is an affiliate of the Glencoe Division of Macmillan/McGraw-Hill School Publishing Company. Their headquarters are located in Mission Hills, California.

William Schickel (1850-1907)¹¹

The architect of the Benziger house, William Schickel, was born in Hochbein, Germany, in 1850. At the age of twenty he immigrated to the United States, taking up residence in New York City, where he began a long and successful career as a designer of commercial, institutional, religious, and residential buildings. In 1870, he was hired by Richard Morris Hunt, one of the nation's preeminent architects. After six months as a draftsman, Schickel entered the office of Henry Fernbach, a German-born architect specializing in commercial and religious commissions. The two German-speaking architects worked together closely, and Schickel was quickly promoted to office foreman.

After two and a half years with Fernbach, Schickel opened his own office. Despite difficult economic circumstances following the financial panic of 1873, his practice thrived. Most early commissions were for German-speaking clients, including tenements on the Lower East Side, and a Staten Island residence (c. 1875, demolished) for Nicholas Benziger's relative, Louis C. Benziger. Ecclesiastical commissions became a speciality. Some early projects include Our Lady of Sorrows School (1874) at Pitt and Stanton Streets on the Lower East Side in Manhattan; St. Benedicts's Church (1874) on Fulton Street in Brooklyn; and St. Catherine's Hospital (1874-75) on Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn.

In 1878, Oswald and Anna Ottendorfer, publishers of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, hired Schickel to design a stable, greenhouse, and garden pavilion for their suburban estate located between West 135th and 137th Streets on the west side of Broadway. Oswald, who briefly lived in Switzerland following the Revolution of 1848, was a leading member of the German-American community, having served as a city alderman before running, unsuccessfully, for mayor in 1874. Schickel benefited from his association with Ottendorfer, receiving subsequent commissions to design three institutions founded by the family, including adjoining structures at 135 and 137 Second Avenue in Manhattan: the Deutsches/German Dispensary (now Stuyvesant Polyclinic, a designated New York City Landmark) and the Freie Bibliothek und Lesehalle (now the Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, a designated New York City

Landmark). Completed in 1883-84, these red brick and terra-cotta designs demonstrate Schickel's sophisticated and original use of historical detail.

Schickel received the commission for the Benziger house in 1890, at the height of his career. During the previous year, he was involved with two major projects in western Harlem, including his last institutional design for Ottendorfer, a facility "for the maintenance and care of the aged and the sick" at 190th Street and Amsterdam Avenue (demolished). Named the Isabella Heimath,¹² after Ottendorfer's daughter who died at a young age, this prominent facility was designed in a vaguely German medieval style. An 1889 brochure, published by the Washington Heights Taxpayers Association, called Schickel's design "superb."¹³ Like the Benziger house, the facade of Isabella Heimath was relatively spare, relieved by brownstone lintels, deep transoms, and a peaked roof punctuated by gabled dormers and other decorative elements. That year, Schickel also began supervising the reconstruction of the Convent and Academy of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic educational complex located east of Convent Avenue between West 132nd and 134th Streets (later the south campus of the City College of New York, demolished).

Schickel expanded his office during the 1880s, forming a partnership in 1887 with Isaac Edward Ditmars (1850-1934) and Hugo Kafka (1843-1915). Known as William Schickel & Company,¹⁴ the firm designed several major department stores, as well as numerous ecclesiastical structures, primarily for the Roman Catholic Church, such as St. Peter's Hospital (1888), now in the Cobble Hill Historic District; Corpus Christi Monastery (1890) in the Hunt's Point section of the Bronx; the Convent of the Sisters of Bon Secours (1889, demolished) on Lexington Avenue and East 81st Street; St. Ignatius Loyola (1895, a designated New York City Landmark) at Park Avenue and 84th Street; and St. Joseph's Catholic Church (1895) on East 87th Street. By 1896, Kafka had left the firm, and it was subsequently renamed Schickel & Ditmars.

The Design of the Benziger House

Schickel and Benziger would have had numerous opportunities, both social and professional, to meet. Not only did Schickel design a house on Staten Island for Benziger's relative, but both men were members of the elite Catholic Club, which would later ask Schickel to design its clubhouse on West 59th Street (1892, demolished). It was one of the most influential Catholic institutions in the city,

known for having assembled one of the finest religious libraries in the United States.¹⁵ Schickel may have also used Benziger as a supplier of religious decoration in his various ecclesiastical commissions.¹⁶ Lastly, with the large number of Schickel-designed projects rising throughout the metropolitan area -- especially in Harlem's western half -- Benziger would have had many chances to see the architect's production first hand.

The plan for the Benziger house was approved by the New York City Department of Buildings on June 6, 1890.¹⁷ Estimated to cost \$25,000, Schickel's brick and brownstone design was described by the *Real Estate Record and Guide* as "handsome."¹⁸ Construction on the two-and-a-half story residence began in September 1890, and was completed by June 30, 1891. The house was quite large, 38 feet wide and 60 feet deep. In his picturesque scheme, Schickel utilized a narrow range of complementary earth tones, from gray to brown. It featured variegated ironspot brickwork, textured granite details, shutters (on most second-story windows), leaded and stained-glass windows (on the first story along 150th Street), and a prominent flared mansard roof covered with clay tiles, pierced by a generous number of pointed gabled dormers. Three slender, urn-like finials set on pedestals marked the crest of the roof. So that the Benzigers could enjoy the panoramic view, a wide front porch with granite pillars and lattice screens was built facing east, as well as a small rustic wood pavilion located at the southeast corner of the site. By the next decade, the various facades would be hidden beneath a thick covering of vines.

Later History

The Benzigers owned No. 345 Edgecombe Avenue for nearly three decades. In 1899, a small two-story brick extension was added to the rear, designed by Schickel & Ditmars. In addition, four servants (two German-born, one French-born, one American) were recorded as residing with the family in 1905.¹⁹

With the inauguration of subway service along Broadway in 1904, numerous multiple-unit dwellings were planned for Washington Heights. Edgecombe Avenue, with its proximity to Colonial Park (opened 1908, now Jackie Robinson Park), proved particularly attractive to developers, and by 1914, six-story apartment buildings stood directly to the north and the south of the Benziger residence. It was at this time that the family relocated to Summit, New Jersey. The house was subsequently leased to William Buehler, a German-born machinist, who

shared it with his wife and three sons.²⁰

In August 1920, the Benzigers sold the property to Dr. Henry W. Lloyd, who used the house as an annex to the hospital he operated in two former residences at 6-8 St. Nicholas Place.²¹ Much of Lloyd's medical practice involved "nervous, mental, drug and alcohol" related cases.²² In September 1920, he purchased the adjoining lot to the north, expanding the property to one hundred feet along Edgecombe Avenue. Lloyd built a driveway here, leading to five one-story garages at the rear (demolished).²³ In 1925, he was recorded as living in the house, along with a second physician and three nurses.²⁴

The psychiatrist Henry W. Rogers purchased No. 345 Edgecombe Avenue in 1927. He and his wife, Helen J. Rogers, renamed the facility "Dr. Rogers' Hospital," continuing to treat "Mental, Neurological, Alcoholic and Drug" related disorders.²⁵ Financial difficulties plagued the hospital during the Depression years; in 1934, the mortgage was refinanced,²⁶ and in 1942, the Manhattan Savings Bank foreclosed on the property. After World War II, the hospital was converted into a nursery school and kindergarten. By the 1980s, the building was being used as a "short-stay" hotel. It was purchased in 1989 by the Broadway Housing Development Fund Company, a non-profit organization providing permanent housing for formerly homeless adults in several northern Manhattan locations.

Description

The Benziger House is a two-and-a-half-story structure faced with ironspot brick and trimmed with wood, brownstone, and granite. The building rests on a schist base with a granite water table. The brick displays an unusually rich and varied palette of color, from tan to brown and ochre. A rear addition, built to the west in 1899, is faced with brick that has been painted dark maroon. The building's most prominent feature is the flared mansard roof, which projects out over the facade roughly three feet and incorporates a series of gabled dormers.

Site features: The building is set on the southern half of a one hundred by one hundred foot lot located at 345 Edgecombe Avenue. Paths surround the house on four sides, paved in either the original brick or non-historic concrete. Along both Edgecombe Avenue and West 150th Street, the raised lot is enclosed by the original iron fence with spiral spindles atop a retaining wall of irregularly-shaped schist boulders. Painted white, the fence is backed by a later aluminum fence topped with spiral

razor wire. Along 150th Street, the retaining wall has granite coping. The wall is interrupted by the original iron gate, framed by a pair of schist pillars with granite capstones. The gate also has thin spiraling spindles. Like the fence that surrounds the property, it is backed by an aluminum fence with barbed wire. The gate slopes down and divides at center, providing access to a steep, curved driveway that rises toward the rear addition. Originally surfaced in brick, the driveway is now partially covered by concrete. The walls at either side of the drive are constructed from large granite blocks.

North of the house, the iron fence extends along Edgecombe Avenue until interrupted by a driveway, which is framed by non-historic concrete posts with brick capstones. A two-part non-historic metal gate has been installed, also backed by a later aluminum fence with barbed wire across the top. Non-historic concrete retaining walls line the short drive that leads from the driveway to the gate. In front of the fence are small areas for plantings, divided into square plots by (possibly historic) flat metal rails anchored into the schist. At the north end of the retaining wall, the schist blocks have been reset in a random fashion.

Edgecombe Avenue facade: The front entry is located on Edgecombe Avenue. Reached by a series of wide granite risers, there are three landings, after the 1st, 6th, and, 9th steps. Where the stairs pass between the original fence, fan-like security gates have been installed to either side. Behind these gates, set into cinderblock walls at either side, are two iron fences topped by spiral razor wire that serve to separate the stairs from the property surrounding the house. Only the railings that are anchored into granite capstones and blocks appear to be original. At the top of the stairs are two original newel posts. The south post is missing its newel cap. On the south side of the stairs, from the uppermost granite landing to the porch, a non-historic pipe railing has been installed.

The porch, probably enclosed during the 1920s, is divided by pillars into four equal-sized bays. At the far left, and center, the pillars are constructed from granite blocks; the others are surfaced with stucco or concrete. The bays are enclosed with horizontal wood spandrels and glazing. The first two, starting from the south, have three sets of historic windows, each with wood mullions and ten fixed panels of glass (facing 150th Street is a fourth set). The next bay is enclosed, and a one-over-one aluminum sash window has been installed at its center. The north bay is open and has red brick flooring. Inside, on the left side is the main entrance

to the building, with a slender vertical window to its left. At the rear of this bay is an ironspot brick wall with a single gated one-over-one window, with a granite sill that extends to the ceiling of the porch. At the bottom of the window is a wood panel where the metal numbers "3,4, and 5" are attached, as well as a mail slot at center.

Below the porch, the upper part of the basement is visible. The materials used above are repeated, except in the areas between the pillars that are now surfaced with concrete. A small window and vent have been inserted. The porch roof projects approximately one foot, and the numerous original wood brackets that support it are visible. The gently sloping roof is surfaced with tar paper and a small area of non-historic red asphalt shingles. In addition, an iron railing, consisting of rusted metal piping and braces, extends across the length of the roof.

Across the *second story* is a continuous stone sill on which four identical windows sit. Each is topped by a flat arch and a slightly larger, textured keystone. At the top of each arch, small alternating pieces of light-colored brick have been incorporated, serving as visual accents. The roof is covered in red asphalt shingles, pierced by dormer windows. Beneath the dormers, the eave-line has been cut back. The three gabled dormers, with wood vergeboards, are original. The largest of the three, at center, has a brick front and two windows with keystones set on a stone sill. Above these windows is a brick bull's-eye, embellished with a keystone. The side dormers, each with a single non-historic window, have similar vergeboards. Between the three original dormers, two additional windows have been created. Above this level, two air-conditioners have been inserted. At the peak, a tall television aerial and two brick chimneys are positioned; the chimney above the center gable is aligned east-west, and the chimney on the north side is aligned north-south.

The **150th Street elevation** faces south and is dominated by a pavilion which projects approximately four feet. Where the pavilion meets the east corner of the facade, a copper drain pipe has been bolted using the original hardware. Set on a high schist base and granite water table, it is capped by a steeply pitched roof and gabled dormer. At the basement level is a window and door, each with prominent schist voussoirs. The first floor has a grouping of three windows with deep transoms. A wood panel has been inserted into each transom. To the right of first floor windows is a metal street sign (possibly original, with white letters on a blue

background) that reads "W. 150TH ST." On the second floor is a group of three windows. The fenestration on both floors is framed by keyed brownstone surrounds.

To the west is a bow window with a pitched roof, raised on a curved granite water table and schist base. It is constructed from wood panels, and each of the five one-over-one aluminum sash windows has a security gate. Much of the original detailing from the bow window has been removed. Above the second window from the right, an air conditioner has been installed. Above the second window from the left is a wood panel, possibly disguising an opening for an air conditioner. West of the bay is a single window with keystone. The second story has three evenly-spaced windows, each with granite sills and keystones. The east opening has been enlarged to incorporate a pair of side-by-side windows. Consequently, the keystone is left of center.

From 150th Street, the **rear addition** is most clearly visible. Both the first and second floors have a window on the left and a door on the right, each embellished with voussoirs and keystones. At the second story is an iron terrace, added before 1914, with a flight of stairs that extends onto the roof/attic level of the main house, as well as a iron ladder, at right, that can be lowered in case of emergency. The roof of the addition is flat and surrounded by a simple bracketed wood cornice with metal railings above. A passage, approximately four feet wide, between the rear addition and a modern fence, separates No. 345 Edgcombe from No. 10 St. Nicholas Place to the west.

The **north elevation** is divided into three parts. The *east section* is windowless, except for a small window close to the front entry on the left side of the first story. An air conditioner is presently installed in this window. Close to the east edge of the north facade, a drain pipe has been attached to the brick. The *center section* projects slightly forward, capped by a roof gable with projecting vergeboards. Five windows step up the facade providing light to an interior staircase. Windows are positioned on the first floor (at left), between the first and second floor (at right), on the second floor (at left), between the second and third floor (at right), and below the level of the attic windows (at center). Each window is embellished with a flat arch, keystone, and stone sill. Directly above the uppermost window is a bull's-eye with keystone, framed by a circle of flush brickwork. At the basement level are two openings with granite lintels. To the west is a window, and to the east an opening



Site of Benziger House, prior to construction
345 Edgecombe Avenue, c. 1890

Source: photographer unknown, collection Nanette De Schauensee, courtesy Michael Henry Adams



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House, c. 1915

Source: photographer unknown, collection Nanette De Schaunensee, courtesy Michael Henry Adams

DR. ROGERS' HOSPITAL

345 Edgecombe Ave., at 150th Street
New York City

MENTAL, NEUROLOGICAL,
ALCOHOLIC and DRUG

Cases Admitted on Voluntary Application
or Commitment

Conveniently located and offering exceptional facilities
for the diagnosis and treatment of acute mental dis-
orders. Physicians may visit patients and cooperate in
the treatment. Charges reasonable. Licensed by State
Department of Mental Hygiene.

Telephone Edgecombe 4-4801

Henry W. Rogers, M.D.
Physician in Charge

Helen J. Rogers, M.D.
Asst. Physician

Advertisement for "Dr. Rogers' Hospital, 345 Edgecombe Ave., at 150th Street"
Source: *Medical Directory of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, 1931*



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
Edgecombe Avenue stairs, railing, and fence

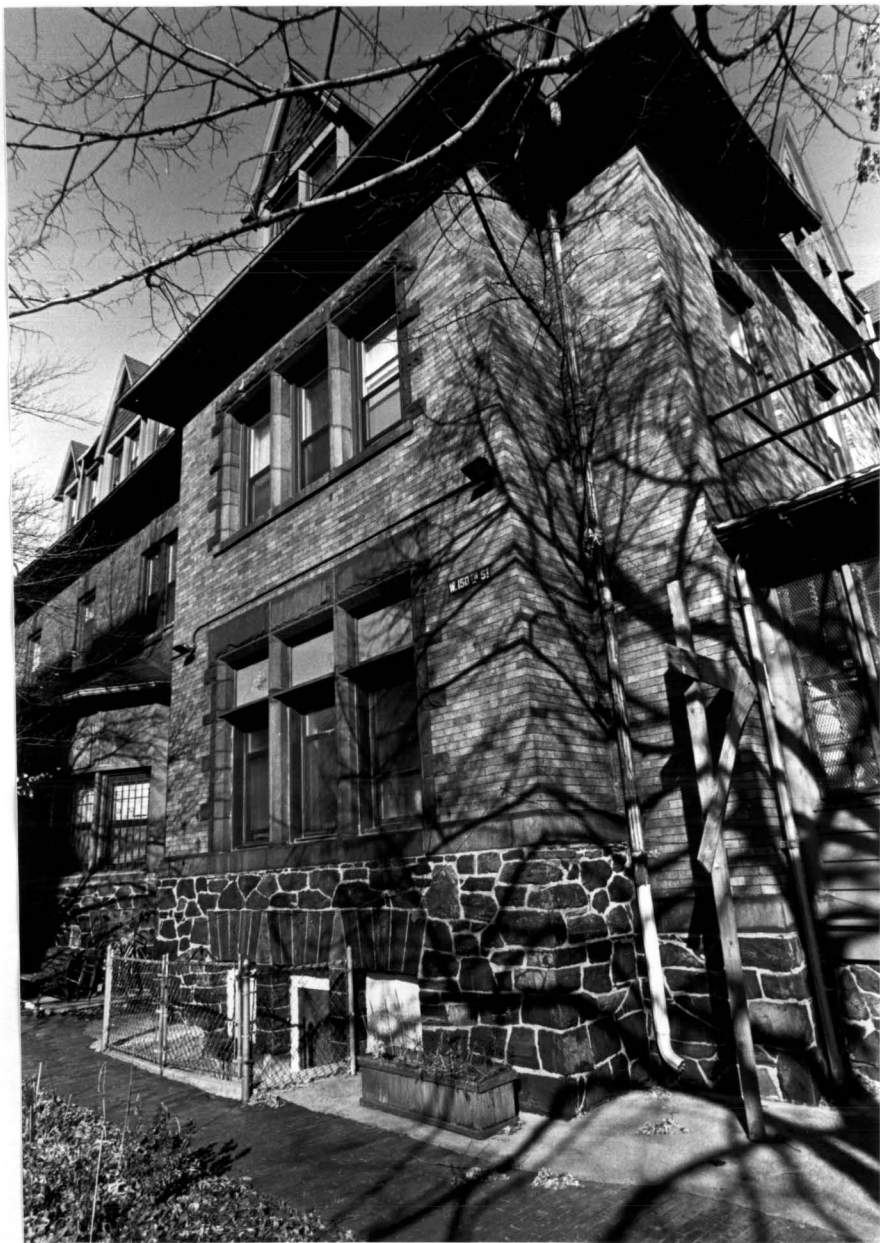
Photo: Carl Forster



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House, Edgcombe Avenue facade
Photo: Carl Forster



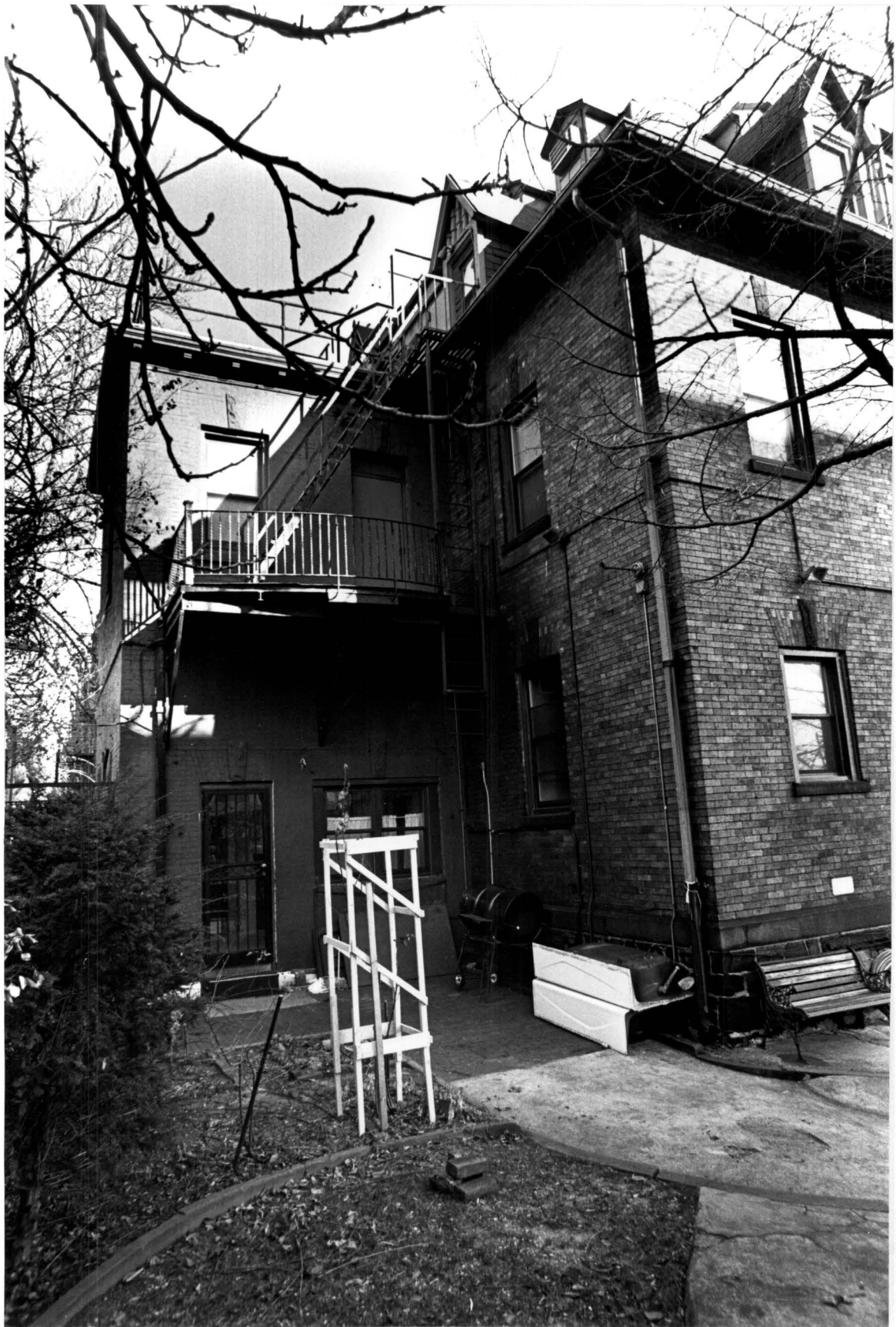
Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House, view of north facade
Photo: Carl Forster



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
View of southeast corner
Photo: Carl Forster



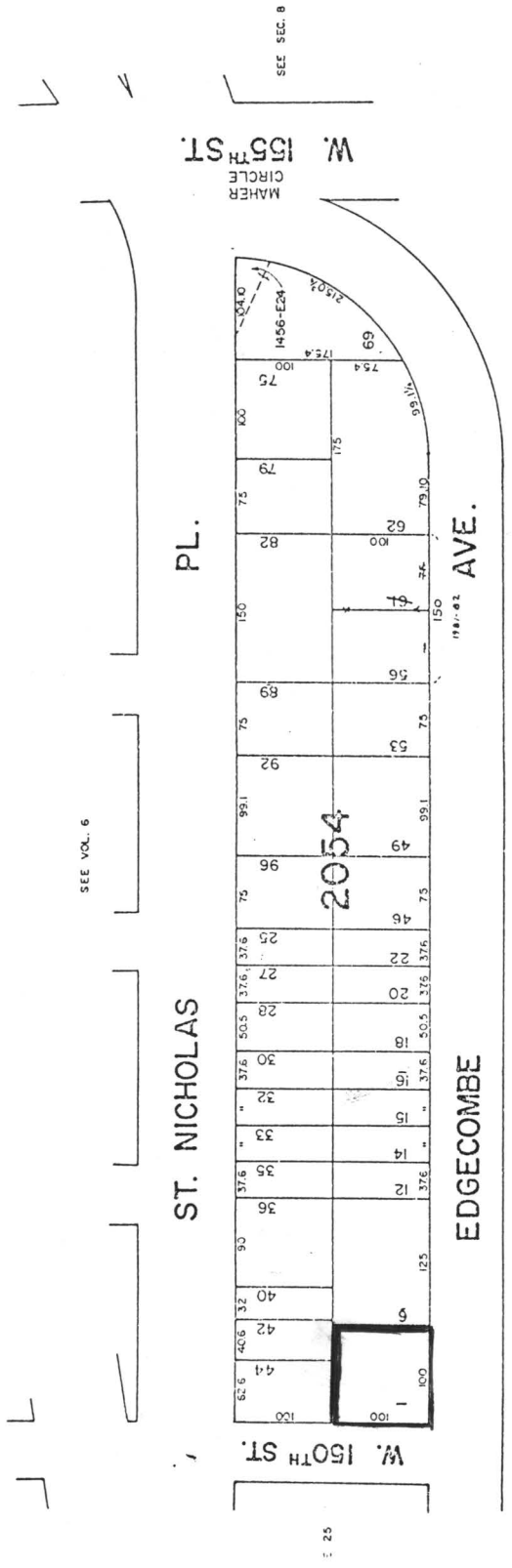
Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
North facade, west dormer
Photo: Carl Forster



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
Rear addition, view from 150th Street
Photo: Carl Forster

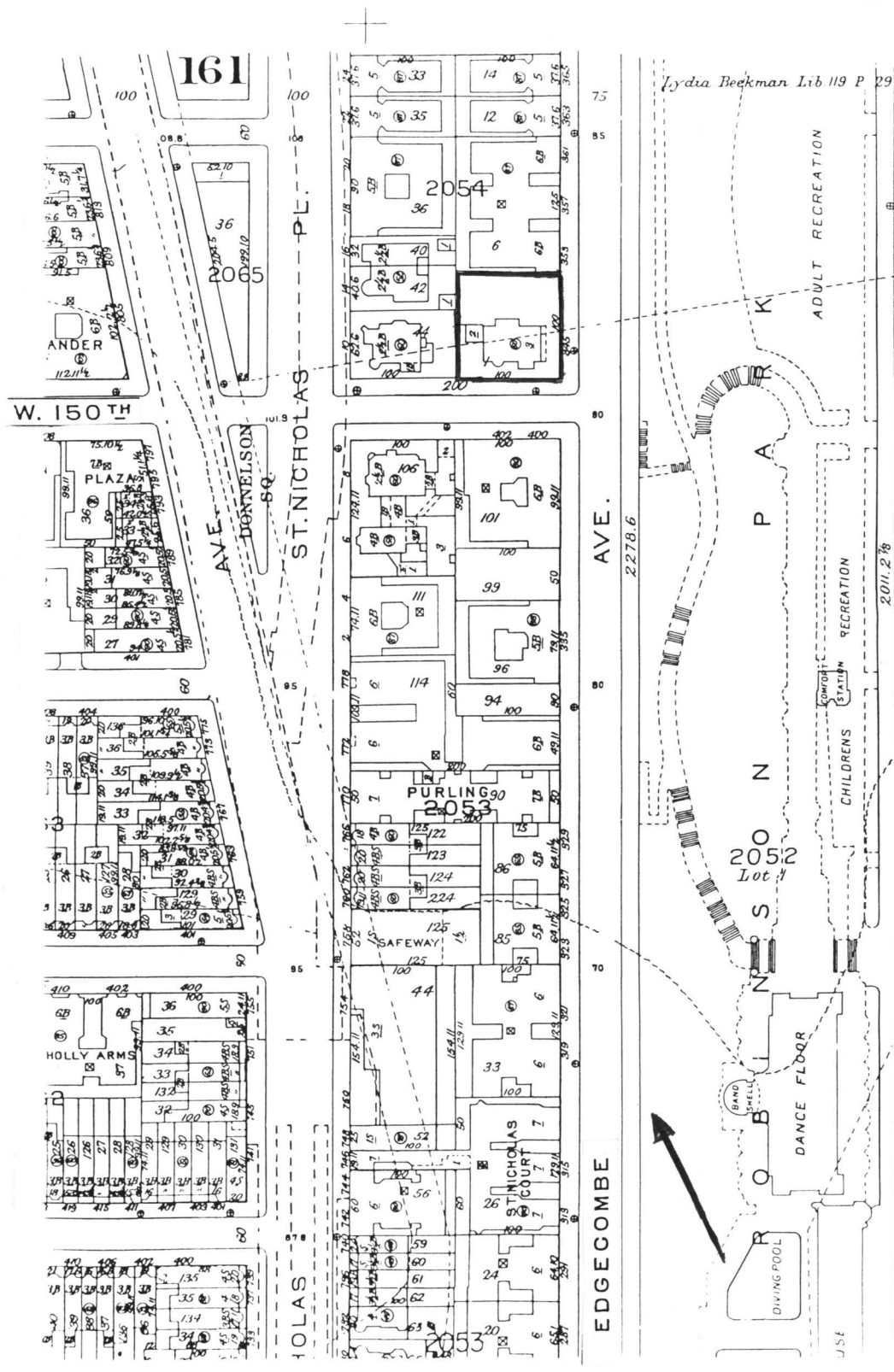


Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
View of 150th Street driveway
Photo: Carl Forster



SEE PAGE 24

Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
 345 Edgecombe Avenue (aka 345-351 Edgecombe Avenue), Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2054, Lot 1
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map



Nicholas C. and Agnes Benziger House
 345 Edgecombe Avenue (aka 345-351 Edgecombe Avenue), Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2054, Lot 1
 Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1997-98.