

**MARTIN ERDMANN HOUSE**, 57 (-59) East 55<sup>th</sup> Street, Manhattan  
Built, 1908-09; architect, Taylor & Levi

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 127

On September 13, 2016, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Martin Erdmann House (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four spoke in favor of designation, including a representative of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer and representatives of the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Municipal Art Society. The Commission also received two letters in favor of designation, including one from Senator Brad Hoylman of the 27<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District of New York. The Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) submitted written testimony opposed to the proposed designation.

Summary

The Martin Erdmann House is an outstanding example of a fashionable English Renaissance Revival town house that was built 1908-09 to the designs of the prominent New York City architectural firm of Taylor & Levi. It was designed in a period-revival style that reflected the upper class tastes of the wealthy art collector, Martin Erdmann, and as such, is a rare survivor of the time when the area around Fifth Avenue was an affluent residential neighborhood.

The five-story town house replaced two 1870s brownstone row houses that had formerly occupied the site. The town house features an American Basement plan, an all-limestone facade, a ground-story arcade, multi-light Tudor-style windows with stone mullions, decorative relief panels, a steep front-facing gable, and multiple chimney pots. The Taylor & Levi firm is best remembered for designing high-style period-revival buildings, including large estates in the New England area. The house remains remarkably intact to its original design, despite several minor alterations such as a slightly reconfigured main entry, a discreet basement entrance, and replacement window sash at several of the upper floors.

The original owner and resident, Martin Erdmann, spent his career as a partner in the banking firm of Speyer & Company. After retiring from the financial business, he purchased the property in 1909 and filled the handsome town house with his extensive art and antique collections until his death in 1937. Later in 1943, the American Institute of Physics converted the building from residential use to offices for its headquarters. Since 1957 the Friars Club has owned the town house for their social and business center. The Martin Erdmann House continues to retain its distinctive domestic character and appealing turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century English Renaissance Revival architecture, a reminder of the days when East Midtown was a neighborhood of homes for New York's well-to-do families.



## BUILDING DESCRIPTION

The Martin Erdmann House is a five-story town house located midblock amidst much taller glass-and-steel towers. Its front facade faces south and sits on a rectangular lot measuring 33 feet by 100 feet. The building proper extends back approximately 74 feet, but a three-story extension terminates at the rear lot line. The facade is clad with irregular-sized limestone blocks that have been lightly scored and set in a random-range pattern. Dominating the streetscape are large windows set between stone mullions and a front-facing steeply-pitched gable roof at the fifth (attic) floor.

### Front Facade

*Historic:* First or ground floor: three-bay arcade; four Tuscan engaged columns resting on tall plinths; a low-relief keystone above each arch; recessed entry with three granite steps; a pair of glazed-and-carved paneled wood entry doors and a matching round-arched transom; a pair of leaded-glass multi-light casement windows with a stone mullion set within a slightly recessed limestone wall at each of the two westernmost bays; a projecting stone water table; rectangular spandrel panels with geometric strap-work designs; carved consoles in line with the engaged columns; two decorative metal downspouts held in place by metal straps at each edge of the front facade.

*Alterations:* First or ground floor: 1930 reduction of steps and a reconfigured main entry; the removal of a stone areaway railing;<sup>1</sup> the installation of a new basement entrance with steps and metal gates below the westernmost window;<sup>2</sup> installation of three curved fabric awnings with closed undersides and recessed lighting; gold-finished Friar-head medallions on the two westernmost keystones; exposed conduit within the westernmost bay; metal hanging light fixture and doorbell within entry; metal rings imbedded in the limestone entry return; a vent in the water table; a flower box mounted below the center bay window; a plaque describing a time capsule; and a metal plaque at each entry plinth, “Friars Club” and “Jerry Lewis Monastery.”

*Historic:* Second or parlor floor: four Ionic pilasters with buckle-like relief patterns on the shafts; window bays consisting of nine multi-light windows with stone mullions and bars; an entablature with additional strap relief patterns above each pilaster.

*Alterations:* Second or parlor floor: removal of historic leaded-glass multi-light windows and the installation of metal multi-light windows with the same number of lights; metal storm windows; installation of a flagpole, two security cameras or sensors, two armatures for facade lights, exposed conduit, and one mounted facade light.

*Historic:* Third floor: a stone balcony railing with interlocking ovals with small rectangular strap-like “connectors”; intermediate posts, each with a buckle-like panel and an engaged ball-topped obelisk; window assemblies of three leaded-glass multi-light windows and transoms; a large central panel with rectilinear strap-work, a pair of heraldic shields, carved Tudor roses, vines, and topped with a semi-circular fan-like tympanum edged with a saw-tooth pattern; label molding connecting the panel and windows with a Tudor rose at each end; a small ball-topped angular arch with a Tudor rose atop the fan-like tympanum.

*Alterations:* Third floor: metal storm windows.

*Historic:* Fourth and fifth floors: hood molding and low relief curvilinear strap-work atop window openings; multi-light windows with stone mullions.

*Alterations:* Fourth and fifth floors: removal of historic leaded-glass multi-light windows and the installation of metal multi-light windows with the same number of lights; extension of the fifth floor to the rear of the main part of the building.

*Historic:* Roof: steep cross-gable slate-clad roof toward the front of the building, copper ridge caps and profiled stone coping; a ribbon-like crocket atop the gable end; two chimneys, each with eight clustered chimney pots with incised spiral patterns.

*Alterations:* Roof: short window units that may have been added at the base of the cross gables.

### **East Facade (lot line)**

*Historic:* stone cladding at upper level, partially parged.

*Alterations:* lower section of exposed lot-line wall finished with polished granite-and-stainless steel cladding, associated with the adjacent Park Avenue Tower and its urban plaza, constructed in 1986-87 at 65 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street.

## **SITE HISTORY**

### Evolution of East Midtown<sup>3</sup>

The Martin Erdmann House is located midblock on the north side of East 55<sup>th</sup> Street between Madison and Park Avenues in East Midtown Manhattan. East Midtown is often defined as roughly bounded to the north by 57<sup>th</sup> Street, to the east by Third Avenue, to the south by 39<sup>th</sup> Street, and to the west by Fifth Avenue. The area's urban growth was largely a result of the advances in rail transportation during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1831, the recently-established New York & Harlem Railroad signed an agreement with New York State permitting the operation of steam locomotives on Fourth (now Park) Avenue, from 23<sup>rd</sup> Street to the Harlem River. Five years later, in 1836, several important street openings occurred in East Midtown. These included 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Lexington Avenue and Madison Avenue. Initially, trains ran at grade, sharing Fourth Avenue with pedestrians and vehicles. In 1856, locomotives were banned below 42<sup>nd</sup> Street -- the site of a maintenance barn and fuel lot. Though rail passengers continued south by horse car, this decision set the stage for East Midtown to become an important transit hub.

Cornelius Vanderbilt acquired control of the New York & Harlem, Hudson River, and the New York Central Railroads in 1863-67. Under his direction, a single terminal for the three railroads was planned and built, known as Grand Central Depot (1868-71, demolished). It was a large structure, consisting of an L-shaped head-house inspired by the Louvre in Paris, with entrances on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Vanderbilt Avenue, as well as a 652-foot-long train shed. The area immediately north, mainly between 45<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> Streets, served as a train yard. Traversed by pedestrian and vehicular bridges, this busy facility occupied an irregularly-shaped site that extended from Lexington to Madison Avenue.

The earliest surviving buildings in midtown are residences in the vicinity of Murray Hill, directly south of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. An 1847 covenant stipulated that all houses be built with brick and stone and many handsome ones from the 1860s and 1870s survive, particularly east of Park Avenue. Following the Civil War, residential development continued up Fifth Avenue, transforming the area between St. Patrick's Cathedral (1853-88) and Central Park (begun 1857,

both are New York City Landmarks). Though most of the large Fifth Avenue mansions – many owned by members of the Vanderbilt family – have been lost, other impressive residences survive on the side streets, between Park and Fifth Avenues. Some of these residences in the East 50s include these: the Villard Houses (1883-85), William & Ada Moore House (1898-1900), Morton & Nellie Plant House (1903-05), and the Fiske Harkness House (1871/1906), all New York City Landmarks. Although Fifth Avenue had been a desirable area for the construction of fashionable residences for wealthy New Yorkers after the Civil War, it gradually became primarily commercial. Despite this change in use, the east-west streets continued to support residential properties and smaller scale apartment houses. It is within this context of architect-designed town houses that the prestigious Martin Erdmann town house was built.

In 1902, 15 railroad passengers were killed in a rear-end collision in the Park Avenue Tunnel, near 56<sup>th</sup> Street. In response to this tragic accident, William J. Wilgus, chief engineer of the New York Central Railroad, proposed that not only should steam locomotives be eliminated from Manhattan but that the terminal should be expanded and completely rebuilt. The city agreed and Grand Central Terminal (a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) was completed in February 1913.

Wilgus envisioned the terminal as part of a city-within-the-city, knitted together by more than two dozen buildings constructed above the newly-submerged rail tracks. Faced with tan brick and limestone, these handsome neo-classical style buildings formed an understated backdrop to the monumental Beaux-Arts style terminal. A key example is the New York Central Building, (a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark). Erected by the railroad in 1927-29, it stands directly above the tracks and incorporates monumental archways that direct automobile traffic towards the Park Avenue Viaduct (1917-19, a New York City Landmark).

The new terminal and subway attracted considerable commercial development to East Midtown, especially near 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the original route of the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit Company) subway. Most of these buildings date to the 1910s and 1920s. In contrast to the neo-classical, City Beautiful aesthetics that shaped Terminal City, these distinctive skyscrapers frequently incorporate unusual terra-cotta ornamentation inspired by medieval (and later, Art Deco) sources. Memorable examples include: the Bowery Savings Bank Building (1921-23, 1931-33) and the Chanin Building (1927-29, both New York City Landmarks).

In 1918, subway service was extended up Lexington Avenue, north of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Though Terminal City was planned with several hotels, such as the Biltmore and Commodore (both have been re-clad), more rooms were needed. A substantial number were located on Lexington Avenue, between 47<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Streets, including the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1929-32) and the Summit Hotel (1959-61, both New York City Landmarks).

Following the end of the Second World War, the New York Central Railroad struggled with debt and entered a significant period of decline. In response, it began to terminate lot leases and sell off real estate properties. The impact of the situation was most powerfully felt on Park Avenue. Apartment buildings and hotels were quickly replaced by an influx of glassy office towers, with pioneering mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Modern-style works such as Lever House (1949-52, a New York City Landmark) and the Seagram Building (1954-56, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark). The success of these and other projects helped make Park Avenue (and East Midtown) one of Manhattan's most prestigious corporate addresses.

#### Design and Construction of the Martin Erdmann House<sup>4</sup>

The block where the Martin Erdmann town house is located was initially developed in the mid-1870s when speculators and owners filled the east-west streets with narrow brownstone row

houses.<sup>5</sup> In 1907 Albert and Henriette Levi purchased two c. 1870s four-story brownstone row houses on two adjacent lots, each with a 16 ½-foot frontage. Subsequently, the architectural firm of Taylor & Levi designed a limestone-clad English Renaissance Revival town house using the two lots.<sup>6</sup> The contractor was the highly respected firm of Marc Eidlitz & Son. The demolition of the row houses and the construction of the new house began July 1, 1908 and it was completed the following year on October 4, 1909.<sup>7</sup> A newspaper article indicated the house was English Tudor in style and notable for its Italian marble hall.<sup>8</sup> When built, all of the windows were multi-light leaded glass, typical of this style. Early photographs show several steps to a slightly raised entry, an areaway with a stone fence, and a fifth floor that consisted solely of the steep cross-gable section at the front of the building (called out as a false mansard). Martin Erdmann, a wealthy retired banker, purchased the house for \$300,000 on July 21, 1909, several months before it was ready for occupancy.

It was constructed using the American Basement plan. This plan places the main entrance at the ground or first floor, thus enabling the building to extend the front facade to the property line along the sidewalk. In addition, with the elimination of a high stoop to the parlor floor, this plan allowed full exposure to light with large windows across the street facade. These town houses were also typically individually designed since a distinct personalized style was highly valued by wealthy property owners.

The Erdmann town house is described as an example of both the English Renaissance Revival style and the Tudor Revival style. In fact, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century English Tudor style is often included as a subcategory of the English Renaissance, characterized by the use of a classical vocabulary applied as decoration onto a building that still retains a medieval-like form and features.<sup>9</sup> The Erdmann House features a classical aesthetic with its smooth limestone cladding, engaged columns, arches with keystones, pilasters, Ionic capitals, consoles, and entablatures. These classical features complement the building's overall medieval form and other decorative Tudor-like details such as the steep front-facing gable, rectangular multi-light leaded windows with stone mullions, label molding, strap-work, Tudor rose pattern, heraldic shields, and tall clustered chimney pots with incised spirals.<sup>10</sup>

The English Renaissance/ Tudor Revival style was one of many period-revival styles that were popular in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only for large estate homes, but also for urban town houses.<sup>11</sup> Within the range of these period-revival styles, the English Renaissance/ Tudor Revival often “signified the authority of history and learning” and “... passion for things English, medieval, or historical.”<sup>12</sup> It was a mark of social and cultural status, and over time and in some instances, it even became a trademark of financiers.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Martin Erdmann town house reflected the image of a wealthy New Yorker who was identifying with England, as evidenced by his many trips abroad and his extensive collection of English art and antiques.

#### Martin Erdmann<sup>14</sup>

Martin Erdmann was a partner in the banking firm of Speyer & Company and later was known for his extensive collection of art and antiques. One of six children, he was born in New York City February 14, 1864. His father was originally from Bavaria, his mother was born in New York. He became a wealthy partner in the New York City branch of the German banking firm of Speyer & Company.<sup>15</sup> He spent his entire career in finance, served on the governing committee of the New York Stock Exchange, was a director of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, and served as a trustee of the Montefiore Hospital. He retired from the banking firm in 1903 when he was 38 years old and in 1909 purchased the town house on East 55<sup>th</sup> Street. Since

he had become an art connoisseur and serious collector, his newly constructed residence was perfectly suited for housing and displaying his extensive collections of 18<sup>th</sup>-century English mezzotints, Chinese porcelains, and valuable English and Italian antiques that included carpets and tapestries.<sup>16</sup> In fact, based on transatlantic ship registries, Erdmann traveled numerous times to and from England during the years 1894 to 1936, presumably for the purpose of adding to his collections.<sup>17</sup>

His wealth allowed him to maintain a large household staff of servants including cook, footman, horseman, butler, and various maids. In addition to maintaining his city town house, it appears he also spent summers at Coolidge Point and Bass Rock Massachusetts.<sup>18</sup> During his later years, he maintained a box at the Opera and participated as a generous donor to several charities. He died at his New York City residence on January 27, 1937 at the age of 73, leaving a large estate exceeding \$5 million dollars to Julie Price Erdmann who was the widow of his brother William, his two sisters, Eugenie Herrmann and Bella E. Prince (or Pringle), and to a cousin, Nelson I. Asiel. Most of his collections were sold at auction and the British Museum acquired a number of his mezzotints.

### Taylor & Levi<sup>19</sup>

The architectural firm of Taylor & Levi was established in 1907 shortly after both Alfredo Taylor and Julian Levi returned from the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Their office at the time they designed the Martin Erdmann House was at 24 East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Even though Taylor died in 1947, the firm remained in business until 1962.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor & Levi designed both country and urban houses in a variety of traditional period-revival styles: Georgian, American Colonial, French and Italian Renaissance, etc. Even after many of their colleagues had transitioned to more modern styles, Taylor & Levi preferred historically-inspired styles that continued to appeal to wealthy clients. In fact, the firm had a number of its commissions showcased in architectural journals during the 1920s, such as the estate house (1928) of Walter Rothschild in White Plains, New York.<sup>21</sup>

Several examples of their work in Manhattan include the Georgian Revival town house (1908) at 8 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street within the Upper West Side/ Central Park West Historic District; the neo-French classic town house (1910-12) at 32 East 70<sup>th</sup> Street within the Upper East Side Historic District; the Ehrich Brothers (later Kesner) Department Store (1911-15), noted for its decorative tile, at 695-709 Sixth Avenue within the Ladies' Mile Historic District; and a 14-story Italian Romanesque Revival apartment building (1927-28), noted for its individuality of design, at 158-162 East 72<sup>nd</sup> Street within the Upper East Side Historic District Extension.

One of their unusual commissions was the design for the Éclair Moving Picture Studio (1911) in Fort Lee, New Jersey, noted to be the first motion picture studio in the United States. Later the firm was an associate designer for the United States Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition of 1937, and a few years later they designed the Rumanian House at the New York World's Fair of 1939.

The architect Alfredo S. G. Taylor (1872-1947) was born in Florence, Italy, to an English father and American mother.<sup>22</sup> He graduated from Harvard College, class of 1894, but returned to Italy for a short time before coming back to the United States to study architecture at Columbia University with Professor William R. Ware. He then attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1898 to 1902. Before joining Julian Levi, he designed several summer homes along the Hudson River and in Connecticut. Over the years Taylor continued to design buildings not only in New York City, but also in Norfolk, Connecticut, where he maintained a country

house. He died in 1947, leaving a body of work in Norfolk, 39 of which have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The architect, watercolorist, and philanthropist Julian Clarence Levi (1874-1971) was born in New York City, the son of Albert A. Levi, a banker and one of the founders of the Society for Ethical Culture.<sup>23</sup> Julian received his A.B. from Columbia University in 1896 and studied architecture as a postgraduate with Professor William R. Ware. He attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1898 to 1904, graduating with numerous awards for his work there. After returning to New York City, he joined Francis H. Kimball where he contributed to the neo-Renaissance design of the J. & W. Seligman and Company Building in lower Manhattan (a New York City Landmark built in 1906-07). After leaving Kimball's office in 1907, he and Alfredo Taylor, a classmate at both Columbia and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, became partners in the firm Taylor & Levi.

Over the years, Levi was active in various large-scale expositions, committees, and organizations. As secretary of the Committee on Foreign Building Cooperation of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), he organized the first exhibition abroad of United States architecture (1920), was founder and first chairman of the French Traveling Fellowship of the AIA, and was founder and first chairman (1930-35) of the Architects' Emergency Committee, which found jobs for unemployed architects during the Depression. As a result of all his professional and volunteer work, Levi received many awards and citations in the United States and abroad, including becoming a fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA). In addition to his architectural work, he was a talented painter during his lifetime. After he died, he left five millions dollars to Columbia University.

#### Marc Eidlitz & Son<sup>24</sup>

The construction firm of Marc Eidlitz & Son was founded in 1864 and was known for its high-quality work. The firm was responsible for many notable commercial, institutional, and residential buildings in New York City.<sup>25</sup> The founder, Marc Eidlitz (1826-1902) was the brother of the architect Leopold Eidlitz. Although Marc Eidlitz retired in 1888, his son Otto M. Eidlitz (1860-1928) became a partner a few years earlier in 1884 and continued the contracting business until 1928.<sup>26</sup> Otto Eidlitz was actually a trained engineer with civil engineering degrees from Cornell University in 1881 and 1890. With its reputation and high standards, the firm continued to be one of the top contracting firms in New York during the first decades of the 20th century, responsible for many high-profile buildings, including the private residences of some of Manhattan's wealthiest clients, including Martin Erdmann.<sup>27</sup>

#### Later History

By the 1930s, much of East Midtown had become the city's central business district with multiple office buildings, hotels, and apartment buildings. Many of the private residences were converted into other uses such as offices, clubs, and exclusive retail shops, and the Martin Erdmann House was no exception. In 1937, Frederick Brown, a real estate broker, bought the house from the Erdmann Estate as an investment. The property was held by Brown and remained empty (by some accounts) for six years until the American Institute of Physics purchased it in 1943.

The American Institute of Physics was founded in 1931 in New York City for the advancement and diffusion of knowledge of physics and its application to human welfare, to publish journals and maintain membership lists.<sup>28</sup> The organization was also tasked with fostering cooperation among different segments of the physics community, both academic and

industrial, and to improve public understanding of science. In 1943 the Institute converted the former Erdmann town house into their headquarters with offices and conference rooms.<sup>29</sup> By 1956 they had outgrown the building and moved to a larger location at 335 East 45<sup>th</sup> Street. They then sold the town house to the Friars Club who at that time was looking for a new clubhouse.

Previously housed in various other New York City locations, the Friars Club bought the property in 1957.<sup>30</sup> This private club was formed in 1904 by press agents, but within a few years extended their membership to men in all aspects of show business. It attracted vaudeville, burlesque, and later film and television performers and producers. According to their rules, at least two-thirds of the membership must be in the entertainment industry. Their monthly newsletter is known as the *Epistle* and the leadership positions are modeled after a monastic hierarchy: abbot, dean, prior, scribe, etc. An article about the purchase noted that the Friars selected the building because its medieval facade complemented their name and organizational titles.

When the Friars purchased the Erdmann House they planned to upgrade the building to accommodate their programs. Their alterations at the front facade were minor, such as the addition of signage, lighting, awnings, etc. The fifth or attic floor was expanded so that today it extends toward the rear of the building.<sup>31</sup> Most of the upgrades included interior work such as the installation of air conditioning, a solarium, a rehearsal hall, a gymnasium, and additional dining rooms.<sup>32</sup> In 1988 the Friars added an additional locker room to accommodate women who were allowed to join their ranks that year, a milestone in the club's history. The building retains most of its original design and materials, and New York City honored the Friars by renaming the section of East 55<sup>th</sup> Street between Madison Avenue and Park Avenue "Friars Way."

### Conclusion

Today, this area of East Midtown still includes scattered examples of 1870s brownstone row houses, elegantly designed town houses, low-rise apartment buildings, and small commercial establishments. In addition, the area has also been transformed into the city's central business district with high-rise office buildings, hotels, and residential towers. The Martin Erdmann House is a rare survivor of a fashionable and dignified town house that was designed by Beaux-Arts-trained architects in a style that recalls English precedents. It is not only a reflection of the original owner whose passion was collecting English art, but it continues to reflect the upper class tastes of wealthy New Yorkers during the early 1900s. As such, the Martin Erdmann House is a tangible reminder of the time when East Midtown was a preferred location for artistic and refined residences.

Report prepared by  
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Evolution of East Midtown by  
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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> New York City Department of Buildings, Alt-374-30: steps removed c. 1930, but no mention of areaway fence. Some accounts indicate that East 55<sup>th</sup> Street was widened making it necessary to remove some of the steps and the areaway fence, but according to the New York City Topographical Bureau, there is no evidence in the city's record that East 55<sup>th</sup> Street was widened. The sidewalk, though, may have been altered, and that may have necessitated changes in the areaway fence and steps. The removal of the steps may have in turn necessitated an altered (lowered) door and transom. Hector Rivera, (Topographical Bureau Associate, Office of Manhattan Borough President), in discussion with the author, January 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The 1938-40 New York City tax photograph of 57 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street does not show the ground floor clearly enough to see if the new basement entrance was added by the time the photograph was taken.

<sup>3</sup> This section is based on designation reports prepared by members of the research staff at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Also see Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal* (John Hopkins University Press, 2003), Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999), Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 1983) and Robert A. M. Stern and others, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between Two World Wars* (New York Rizzoli Books, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: New York City Department of Buildings, New Building, NB 116-08, 4/4/1908; New York City Office of Register, Conveyances, Liber 151, page 297; "Home in Midtown Sold to Operator," *New York Times (NYT)*, July 23, 1937, 33; Rose V. Hutchisson, "The American Institute of Physics Building: I Early History of the Building," *Journal of Applied Physics* 14 (October 1943), 501-09; Blanchette Arnaud, "The American Institute of Physics Building: II An Architectural Study of the Building," *Journal of Applied Physics* 15 (September 1944), 642-48; William Perris, *Atlas of New York City* (New York: Perris & Browne, 1857-1862); *Atlas of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan* (New York: G.W. Bromley & E. Robinson, 1879); *Atlas of the City of New York: embracing all territory within its corporate limits from official records, private plans & actual surveys* (New York: E. Robinson & R.H. Pidgeon, 1885); *Atlas of the City of New York Manhattan Island* (Philadelphia: G. W. Bromley & Co., 1891 and 1911); *Manhattan Land Book: Desk & Library Ed.*, (New York: G. W. Bromley & Co., 1934, 1955, and 1970); Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 839; Coalition for a Globally Competitive NYC, *Icons, Placeholders & Leftovers: Midtown East Report* (CivicVisions LP, February 27, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> During that time there were also a number of institutions in the neighborhood, including a Reformed Episcopal church at the corner of East 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Madison Avenue, St. Luke's Hospital on East 55<sup>th</sup> Street just west of Fifth Avenue, Columbia College at East 50<sup>th</sup> Street, and several orphan asylums.

<sup>6</sup> Albert and Henriette Levi's son, architect Julian Clarence Levi, was a partner in Taylor & Levi, the firm that designed the Martin Erdmann House.

<sup>7</sup> When built it was reputedly "the most fireproof residence in Manhattan." Hutchisson, 505. It was also noted that the town house used city-provided steam heat, but by the early 1900s it was not commonly installed for private residences due to the expense and maintenance of the system. Sean Adams, "Why District Steam Heat Flopped in Gilded Age New York," BloombergView, accessed 1/14/2016; <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2012-12-17/why-district-steam-heat-flopped-in-gilded-age-new-york>.

<sup>8</sup> The original interior arrangement of the house consisted of a groin-vaulted entrance hall and billiard room, a barrel-vaulted stairway hall, and kitchen on the first floor; a large front-facing library (parlor) and dining room with butler's pantry on the second (parlor) floor; Mr. Erdmann's bedroom and a secondary library and sitting room on the third floor; and bedrooms and sitting rooms on the fourth floor. An elaborate curving staircase faced a light court with leaded glass windows at the east lot line wall. The interiors were richly finished; many of the rooms had decorative plasterwork, carved and paneled woodwork, vaulted ceilings, and Tudor-arch fireplace surrounds. It was noted that the architects designed every interior detail including the chandeliers and draperies. A photograph of the interiors and floor plan were published in the journal *Architecture*, October 15, 1909, as referenced in Hutchisson, 501-09; Arnaud, 642-48.

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<sup>9</sup> The English Renaissance period extends from approximately 1485 to 1660, and includes the earliest sub-style known as Tudor, primarily a domestic application of some Renaissance elements onto a medieval form. [http://www3.canyons.edu/Departments/INTD/Faculty/Kavesh/ID%20114/114%20Reading%20Assignments/11.%20English\\_renaissance.htm](http://www3.canyons.edu/Departments/INTD/Faculty/Kavesh/ID%20114/114%20Reading%20Assignments/11.%20English_renaissance.htm), accessed 1/7/2016; other early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Tudor-inspired town houses in the East Midtown area include the Mary Hale Cunningham House (1909 facade) at 124 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street and the Fisk-Harkness House (1906 facade) at 12 East 53<sup>rd</sup> Street. Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Mary Hale Cunningham House* (LP-2085) (New York: City of New York, May 1, 2001), prepared by Jay Shockley; LPC, *Fiske-Harkness House* (LP-2406) (New York: City of New York, June 28, 2011), prepared Olivia Klose.

<sup>10</sup> It is especially interesting to note that several decorative features of the Erdmann town house are almost identical to those on the 15<sup>th</sup>-century English country estate, Blickley, in Norfolk, England. These include curvilinear stone strap-work above the windows, the balcony railing with connecting oval shapes, an arched entrance with classical features, clustered chimney pots, and large expanses of multi-light windows.

<sup>11</sup> Leland Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2001), 350. The term “Period-Revival” is sometimes used when describing historical styles such as the English Renaissance/English Tudor, Georgian, American Colonial, French and Italian Renaissance, etc., adapted for modern buildings in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Alan Hewitt, *The Architect and American Country House*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 77.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: Ancestry.com, United States Census, 1880, 1910, 1920, 1930; Ancestry.com, *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line] Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2007; “Weddings Past and To Come,” *New York Tribune/ Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1895, 7; “Collis P. Huntington, Died August 13, 1900,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 17, 1900, 14; “Stock Exchange Committees,” *New York Times (NYT)*, May 18, 1901, 13; “Legal Notice,” *New York Tribune/ Herald Tribune*, January 1, 1903, 13; “Society Fills the Opera House for Opening With ‘La Gioconda,’” *New York Herald Tribune (NYHT)*, November 3, 1925, 21; “List of Additional Contributions to Relief Fund,” *NYHT*, November 10, 1931, 8; “Swampscott Club Entertains for Summer Colony,” *NYHT*, June 26, 1932, E18; “Martin Erdmann, 73, Dies Suddenly Here,” *NYT*, January 28, 1937, 25; “Home in Midtown Sold to Operator,” *NYT*, July 23, 1937, 33; “Sale of Mezzotints Ends,” *NYT*, November 17, 1937, 19; “Erdmann Estate Put at \$5,170,012,” *NYT*, December 1, 1938, 21; “Erdmann Left A Net Estate of \$5,170,012,” *NYHT*, December 1, 1938, 22; and Christopher Gray, “Streetscapes: Man Walks Into a Zoning Meeting,” *NYT*, September 15, 2013, 8.

<sup>15</sup> The Speyer family realized the potential for opportunities in North America, establishing the New York City branch in 1845. By the 1870s they were one of the top five issuers of United States and Mexican railroad securities, their nearest rivals being Kuhn, Loeb & Co., and J.P. Morgan. The New York City branch closed in 1938. Wikipedia, accessed January 20, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speyer\\_family](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speyer_family) International firm.

<sup>16</sup> Nineteen of Erdmann’s mezzotints were acquired by the British Museum after his death. “British Museum Acquires Art from Erdmann Estate,” *NYT*, December 13, 1937, 16; “The Martin Erdmann Collection,” *NYHT*, October 10, 1937, F9. Mezzotints use a dry-point method of printing that was invented 1642 in Germany. The process was often employed by artists to reproduce older paintings and to publicize contemporary artwork. Collecting British mezzotints was particularly popular from 1760 to 1929. “Mezzotint” *Wikipedia* <https://enWikipedia.org/wiki/Mezzotint>, accessed December 9, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Ancestry.com. *New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

<sup>18</sup> “Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere,” *NYT*, June 27, 1932, 14; “Swampscott Club Entertains for Summer Colony,” *NYHT*, June 26, 1932, E18.

<sup>19</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: LPC, *Upper East Side Historic District Extension Designation Report*, (New York: City of New York, March 23, 2010), prepared by Christopher D. Brazee and Jennifer L. Most, 40-42; LPC, *Upper West Side/ Central Park West Historic District Designation Report*, Vol. 3, (New York: City of New York, April 24, 1990), 589; LPC, *Ladies’ Mile Historic District Designation Report*, (New York: May 2, 1989), 394-398; LPC, *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report*, (New York: City of New York, May 10, 1981), 475; and Thomas Mellins, Gregory Gilmartin, Robert A. M. Stern, *New York 1930*:

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*Architecture and Urbanism Between Two World Wars*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publication, Inc., 1987) 393, 397.

<sup>20</sup> The report, *Icons, Placeholders & Leftovers* does not credit the illustrious career of Taylor & Levi.

<sup>21</sup> “House of Walter Rothschild,” *American Architecture*, (May 20, 1928), 661. “House of Francis G. Noble, Norfolk, Conn.,” *American Architecture*, (March 10, 1921), 239; “House of Dudley D. Sisher,” *The American Architect-The Architectural Review* CXXI (April 12, 1922), 304-308.

<sup>22</sup> Information about Alfredo S. G. Taylor is based on the following sources: National Register of Historic Places, “Alfredo S. G. Taylor Thematic Group,” Norfolk, Connecticut, prepared by David F. Ransom, June 18, 1982, listed December 30, 1983; “Obituary,” *NYHT*, October 23, 1947. The Taylor Collection, held by the Norfolk Historical Society consists of a quantity of Taylor correspondence, some of his drawings, a number of drawing blueprints, and related materials.

<sup>23</sup> Information on Julian Clarence Levi is based on the following sources: LPC, *J. & W. Seligman & Company Building Designation Report* (LP-1943) (New York: City of New York, February 13, 1996), prepared by Jay Shockley, 4-5; “Julian C. Levi,” *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Co., 1938), 446-447, note: the Martin Erdmann house is specifically called out in the Cyclopaedia; “Obituary,” *NYT*, Aug. 25, 1971, 40; “Julian C. Levi,” *American Architects Directory* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1962), 417; “In Memoriam: Julian C. Levi,” *National Sculpture Review* 20 (Fall 1971), 28; “Columbia University's Oldest Alumnus,” *A.I.A. Journal* (Oct. 1971), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Information on Eidlitz is based on the following sources: LPC, *Bell Telephone Laboratories Complex Designation Report* (LP-2391) (New York: City of New York, October 25, 2011), prepared by Jay Shockley; “Otto M. Eidlitz, Noted Builder, Dies,” *NYT*, October 31, 1928, 30; Kathryn E. Holliday, *Leopold Eidlitz: Architecture and Idealism in the Gilded Age* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 30.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the significant buildings constructed by the firm during that time include the Bell Telephone Laboratories Complex (now the Westbeth Artists' Housing), the St. Regis Hotel, the B. Altman and Company Department Store Building on Fifth Avenue, the Empire Building, the J.P. Morgan Building on Wall Street, the former Yale Club Building at 30-32 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street, the Bankers' Trust Co. Building, and the American Telephone & Telegraph Company Building, all New York City Landmarks.

<sup>26</sup> Otto's brother Robert James Eidlitz, an architect, was also with the firm.

<sup>27</sup> *Marc Eidlitz & Son: 1854-1914* (New York: 1914, Limited publication of the commemoration book for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the firm). Residences that were pictured in this publication include those belonging to the following wealthy clients: Augustus D. Julliard, Edwin W. Bayer, Franklin L. Hutton, Bradley Martin, William W. Cook, Edward W. Sheldon, Thomas F. Ryan, Harley T. Proctor, Peter Doelger, and Martin Erdmann.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.aip.org/aip/history>, accessed January 11, 2016;

<sup>29</sup> New York City Department of Buildings, Certificate of Occupancy 30908, May 1, 1945; “\$500,000 is Sought by Physics Group,” *NYT*, November 19, 1956, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Information on the Friars Club is based on the following sources: Jackson, ed., 483; “Friars Purchase A New Clubhouse,” *NYT*, January 13, 1957, 52; “Friars Club Opens Its New Building,” *NYT*, May 12, 1950, 32; <http://friarsclub.com/heritage/>, accessed January 28, 2016; “At 84, a Spry Friars Club Accepts Women in Its Cast of Characters,” *NYT*, November 9, 1988, C1.

<sup>31</sup> The attic-floor extension to the rear of the Erdmann House most likely occurred during the time there was an adjacent six- story party-wall building hiding the east facade from street view. Today, the 1986-87 Park Avenue Tower is set back from the street exposing much of the Erdmann House party wall, including this extension. The lower section of the lot line wall is clad to match the tower.

<sup>32</sup> Additional work included a kitchen, bar, lounges, new offices, a card room, billiard room, lockers, steam room, and exercise and massage rooms. Department of Buildings, Certificate of Occupancy No. 48334, December 2, 1957.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the buildings and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Martin Erdmann House 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 Martin Erdmann House is significant as an excellent example of the English Renaissance Revival style, incorporating both medieval and classical features; that it was designed by the prominent architectural firm of Taylor & Levi; that the two partners in the firm of Taylor & Levi, Alfredo S. G. Taylor and Julian C. Levi, had both trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts; that both architects were known for their high quality period-revival designs for town houses in New York City and for estates in the surrounding area; that the Martin Erdmann town house was constructed in 1908-09 using a sophisticated design that reflected the upper class tastes and preferences of the building's first owner, Martin Erdmann; that Martin Erdmann was a prominent retired banker who used the residence to house his extensive art and antique collections; that the American Basement-plan town house features an all-limestone facade, a steep front-facing gable, engaged columns; arcaded first floor; multi-light Tudor-style windows with stone mullions, decorative panels, applied strap-work designs, and multiple chimney pots; that the house was later owned by the American Institute of Physics until it was bought by the Friars Club who has owned it since 1957; that the town house remains remarkably intact to its original design and materials; that a few minor alterations include a slightly reconfigured main entry and a discreet basement entrance; and that the town house is a rare survivor and a reminder of the time when the neighborhood around Fifth Avenue in East Midtown was a prestigious residential area for affluent New Yorkers.

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 Martin Erdmann House, Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 127, including the house and the steps and the land upon which these improvements are sited, and the adjacent rear yard, as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair  
Diana Chapin, Wellington Chen,  
Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, John Gustafsson,  
Adi Shamir-Baron, and Kim Vauss, Commissioners





**Martin Erdmann House**  
Borough of Manhattan  
Tax Map Block 1291, Lot 127  
57-59 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street  
(Photograph: Sarah Moses, 2016)

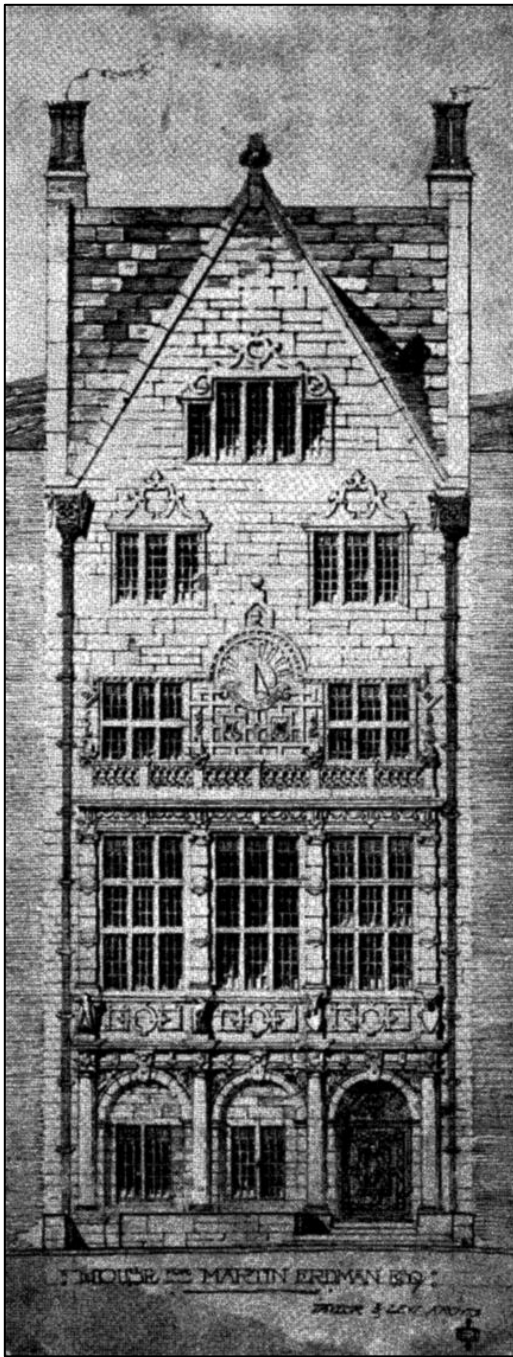


Martin Erdmann House  
(Photographs: Sarah Moses, 2016)





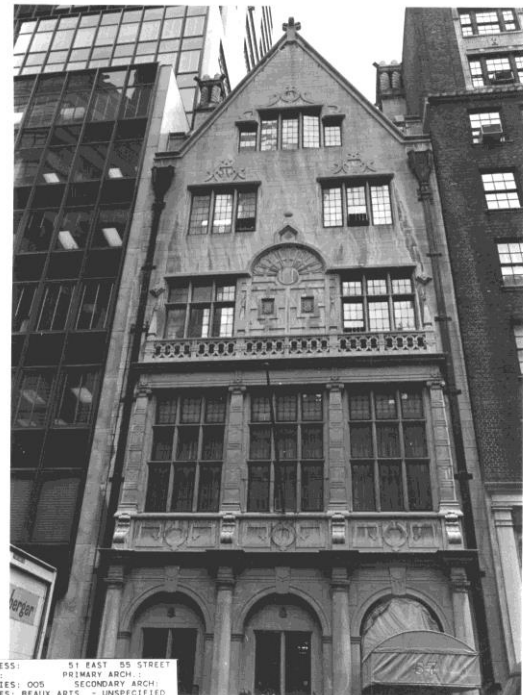
Martin Erdmann House  
(Photograph: Sarah Moses, 2016)



Martin Erdmann House  
 (Drawing: *Journal of Applied Physics*  
 Vol. 14, October 1943, 502)



Martin Erdmann House  
 Historic Photo c. 1910  
 Source: Museum of the City of New York  
 (Photograph: Wurtz Bros.)



Martin Erdmann House  
 (Photograph: Landmarks Preservation Commission  
 Survey, c. 1980)



