

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House



Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

LOCATION

Borough of Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 831, Lot 8
404 55th Street

(aka 402-404 55th Street, 5501 4th Avenue)

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

A restrained Renaissance Revival style house designed in 1907 by the prominent architect R. Thomas Short for the president of the Bay Ridge Savings Bank, Dr. Maurice T. Lewis, which is a significant example of single family residential development in a neighborhood comprised mostly of row houses.



55th Street (East) facade and side (South) facade
2018 (above)



4th Avenue (North) Facade
2018 (left)

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

404 55th Street, Brooklyn

Community Development Center Executive Director

Chris Cirillo submitted written support. No one spoke in opposition to the designation.

Designation List 504

LP-2608

Built: 1907

Architect: R. Thomas Short

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 831, Lot 8 in part, beginning at the northeast corner of the property line of lot 8, southerly along the eastern property line of lot 8 approximately 65 feet and 4 inches to a point on a line extending easterly from the southernmost façade of the building, and encompassing such façade, then westerly along said line and the southernmost facade of the building to the western property line of lot 8, northerly along the western property line of lot 8 to the northern property line of lot 8, then easterly to the place of beginning, as shown on the attached map.

On March 6, 2018, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing was advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Thirty people spoke in favor of the designation including Councilmember Carlos Menchaca, a representative of US Congresswoman Nydia M. Valazquez, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Historic Districts Council, and members of the Sunset Park community. Community Board 7 Chairman Cesar Zuniga, and LOTT

Summary

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

The Dr. Maurice Thomas Lewis House is a restrained Renaissance Revival style house designed in 1907 by the prominent architect R. Thomas Short for Dr. Maurice T. Lewis. It is an excellent example of early 20th century residential design and the only mansion in a neighborhood comprised mostly of row houses.

Dr. Lewis began a career in banking while continuing his 38-year-long practice as a physician. He was a founder, trustee, and eventually president of the Bay Ridge Savings bank, the area's largest banking institution of the early 20th Century.

The Sunset Park neighborhood developed in the late-19th and early-20th centuries as a residential community for the working waterfront of south Brooklyn. The neighborhood is largely made up of speculatively-built row houses, primarily developed for the working- and middle-classes, with mixed-use and commercial buildings along the avenues. The Lewis House stands out in the neighborhood due to its refined architectural character and relatively grand scale in comparison to the typical row house development.

At the turn of the 20th century, 4th Avenue was a grand boulevard, with a landscaped median lined with churches, trees and mixed-use buildings. Dr. Lewis commissioned R. Thomas Short, of the firm Harde and Short to design his new home. Harde and Short began their partnership in 1901 and were prominent New York City architects in the early-20th century. Some designated landmarks by the firm include Alywn Court at 182 West 58th Street, the Studio Building at 44-48 West 77th Street in the

Central Park West Historic District, and the Red House at 350 West 85th Street in the Riverside-West End Historic District Extension.

The intact brick and limestone facades of the Lewis House feature a classical tripartite configuration typical of the Renaissance Revival style, and restrained classical ornamentation. It is a fine example of a Renaissance Revival single family dwelling, significant to the early-20th century architectural development of Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

Building Description

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

Description

The Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House is a three-story free-standing single-family residential dwelling executed in brick and limestone. It was designed by R. Thomas Short in a restrained Renaissance Revival style, a style popular in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Prominent features reflective of the style's Renaissance and Georgian precedents are the tall rusticated limestone base, the red brick facades with limestone window surrounds, the central portico entrance topped by a Palladian window, and the projecting modillioned cornice.

55th Street (East) Facade

The north façade faces 55th Street and features five bays arranged symmetrically with a central entrance bay with projecting portico, and a recessed single-bay extension to the south. The façade is clad in brick with limestone at the base, second floor window surrounds, and third floor lintels, and a painted metal cornice. The base consists of the exposed basement and first floor, and is clad in smooth-faced rusticated limestone with recessed horizontal coursing. The basement windows have flush, splayed lintels with keystones. A small projecting limestone belt course separates the cellar from the first floor. At the first floor there are four windows with splayed limestone lintels flush with the horizontal banding, topped with limestone keystones. The building's primary entrance is a central portico with two Tuscan columns and two Tuscan style pilasters resting. The columns and pilasters support a projecting entablature with an

architrave, flat frieze and cornice. The double leaf wooden door has a molded surround and each door has two large glass lights covered with decorative metal security grilles.

The base is capped by a molded limestone cornice, separating the first and second floors. The second floor windows have ornate limestone surrounds, with pilasters that rest on the limestone sills. The pilasters have simple bases and square Tuscan capitals, supporting a heavy limestone entablature with a projecting molded cornice. In the central bay above the portico entrance is a tripartite Palladian style window with Tuscan pilasters flanking each window, and an arched pediment entablature featuring floral and shield relief carvings within the tympanum. The second and third floors are separated by a small molded limestone belt course at the sill line of third-floor windows. In the center bay are two windows, and in each flanking bay are single windows. The façade is terminated by a metal cornice with classical detailing, including molded modillions and end brackets with guttae. There is a shallow parapet on the roof, set back from the cornice. Above the parapet there are two, asymmetrically-placed chimneys that may now incorporate mechanical systems.

Alterations

All windows replaced; metal security grilles installed over windows (cellar, some first floor, Palladian window on second floor); stoop stairs replaced with granite; guttae missing from end brackets in the cornice; security camera installed at portico; metal gate installed at entrance in line with fence; at eastern recessed bay the door has been replaced, new concrete ramp installed, and awning above door.

4th Avenue (North) Facade

The façade facing 4th Avenue consists of three symmetrical bays. The base, including a portion of the basement and the first floor, is clad in smooth-faced rusticated limestone with horizontal coursing, and the upper two stories are brick. The cellar windows have flush, splayed lintels with keystones. A small projecting limestone belt course separates the cellar from the first floor. At the first floor there are three windows with splayed limestone lintels flush with the horizontal banding, topped with limestone keystones. The first and second floors are separated by a projecting limestone molded cornice. The second floor windows have ornate limestone surrounds, with pilasters that rest on the limestone sills. The pilasters have simple bases and square Tuscan capitals that support heavy limestone entablatures with projecting molded cornices. The second and third floors are separated by a small molded limestone belt course at the sill line of the third-floor windows. The façade is terminated by a painted metal cornice with classical detailing, including molded modillions and end brackets with guttae. There is a shallow parapet on the roof, set back from the cornice.

Alterations

All windows replaced; air conditioner and metal security grille installed at third floor central window; cornice brackets missing guttae; signage.

West Facade

This painted brick elevation is undeveloped; it has nine windows of different sizes and configurations, including an arched window at the second floor.

Alterations

Painted brick, all windows replaced; metal security grilles installed on some windows; conduit and cables installed.

South Facade

This painted brick elevation is undeveloped and is only partially visible. It has windows of different sizes and configurations, a non-historic door and bridge, and a modest corbeled brick cornice.

Alterations

Painted brick, second floor door and awning; bridge connecting second floor to roof of garage; metal security grilles over windows, downspout.

Site Features

Iron fence on concrete double curb in historic location; stone steps with iron gate; concrete sidewalk; concrete ramp to entrance door at recessed bay.

Site History

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

Sunset Park

Located along New York Bay in the southwestern section of Brooklyn, the neighborhood now known as Sunset Park was one of the first areas of Brooklyn to be settled by farmers in the mid-17th and 18th centuries. It was not until the 1830s when Brooklyn officially changed in status from a town to a city that surveyors began to map out city streets and development occurred.

The City of Brooklyn planned a public park, called Sunset Park, in 1890 on 18 acres of land in the heart of the area. Prior to the creation of the park, the blocks from 17th to 39th Streets were called South Brooklyn, and from 39th Street to 65th Street were considered part of Bay Ridge. 39th Street, the main artery to the ferry, served to demarcate neighborhoods. The 39th Street demarcation line disappeared during the 1960s, and the area between 17th Street to 65th Street became known as Sunset Park.¹

In the 1890s Irving T. Bush recognized the area's potential for development and built a series of piers, warehouses, and factories that would come to be known as Bush Terminal. The complex stretched from 32nd to 51st streets and was the largest commercial and industrial facility in New York, providing employment for over 20,000 workers. It was linked to the city by both rail and by the ferry at 39th Street and 2nd Avenue.² Improvements in infrastructure and the availability of jobs led to the need for additional rail transportation, which attracted the Brooklyn City Railroad Company, the Brooklyn Bath & West End Railroad Company, and

the Union Elevated Railroad Company to construct rail connections to Sunset Park.³

An initial wave of residential development took place in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, consisting mainly of masonry row houses and tenements, although some of the earlier rows predating the extension of fire laws into this area were wood frame construction. At the time of the construction of the Lewis House in 1907, development in Sunset Park was at its peak and 4th Avenue was still a grand boulevard, with a landscaped median that was lined with churches, trees and mixed-use buildings. Grand freestanding houses like the Lewis House are uncommon in Sunset Park, and it is perhaps the only one that remains.

A second wave of development took place in Sunset Park in the early 1930s, consisting of infill housing and public, religious, and institutional buildings. By the late 1940s several factors led to the decline of Sunset Park, including industrial relocations, the cessation of the 3rd Avenue elevated line, and the subsequent construction of the Gowanus Expressway that separated most of the neighborhood from the waterfront. The move of the maritime industry from Brooklyn to New Jersey in the 1960s and the attendant loss of jobs intensified economic decline in Sunset Park. A combination of local, state, and federal aid in the 1970s helped to improve the area's economy, and since the 1980s, Sunset Park has experienced an influx of Asian and Latin-American immigrants, as well as commercial and residential resurgence that continues today and has resulted in a dynamic, diverse community.⁴

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis

Maurice Thomas Lewis was born in Kemptown, Maryland on April 24, 1867 to Milton R. Lewis, a merchant, and his wife Sarah (née Hodges).⁵ By the

early 1890s he had moved to Brooklyn where he received his medical training at the Long Island College Hospital (class of 1893) and did his internship at Kings County Hospital in Flatbush. A general practitioner, Lewis also served as a doctor to the police department and was certified by the state as a qualified examiner of lunacy cases for the county of New York.⁶

In addition to his medical practice, Lewis was among the prominent men of Bay Ridge behind the incorporation of the Bay Ridge Savings Bank in 1909 and served as its president and trustee from 1909 until his death in 1931.⁷ During this period he oversaw the growth of the bank and the construction of its new headquarters at the corner of 5th Avenue and 54th Street in 1927, at which time the bank was serving over 40,000 depositors.⁸ In August 1929 depositors, panicked by a rumor about the bank's financial stability allegedly started by a customer denied a loan, began a two-day run on the bank. Lewis, who had been out of town at the time, returned and with the help of affidavits from banking officials and other bankers, and the visible display of cash, convinced depositors of the bank's strength.⁹

Lewis married Alida A. Fraim in 1895 with whom he had a daughter, Ruth (later Mrs. T. Stewart Haller). Active in civic and professional organizations, Lewis belonged to the Bankers Club of Brooklyn, serving as its president from 1924 to 1925; the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce; the Brooklyn Rotary Club; the advisory council for the National City Bank (following its merger with People's Trust Company); the Elks; Free and Accepted Masons; and the Shriners Kismet Temple; as well as serving as a Democratic presidential elector.¹⁰ He was an avid driver of carriage race horses, and a member of the Parkway Driving Club.¹¹

402-404 55th Street

Dr. Lewis and his family were residents of Sunset Park for many years before constructing the house at 404 55th Street in 1907. Dr. Lewis purchased the lot in 1899 from William Wharton, while living in the house next door at 414 55th Street. In 1902 Dr. Lewis, an avid carriage racer, built a stable on the property, with the address 412 55th Street.¹² Several neighbors were opposed to the stable, but Dr. Lewis built it in spite of their petitions against it.¹³ Dr. Lewis commissioned R. Thomas Short, a prominent New York architect who had originally been in private practice in Brooklyn to design his home. The stately brick and limestone home was built on the corner of 55th and 4th Avenue in 1907, and was noted at the time in the *Brooklyn Daily News*.¹⁴ Dr. Lewis lived in the house with his wife, daughter and grandchildren until his death in 1931.¹⁵

The year of Dr. Lewis' death, Dr. Sonya Monen and her husband Dr. Maurice C. Whitehill purchased the home from the Lewis family.¹⁶ They resided in and conducted their medical practice here for many years. Dr. Monen was named Lieutenant Commander of the U.S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve, or S.P.A.R.S., the first woman physician to be appointed to the position. She owned and occupied the home until her death in 1996.¹⁷

R. Thomas Short

Richard Thomas Short (1869-1950) was born in Canada, and immigrated to the United States with his widowed mother and three sisters in 1885. The family settled in Brooklyn, and Short established an architectural practice there in 1894. Four years later he moved to Manhattan, where he worked as head draftsman for the architect James E. Ware. Short won first prize in an influential model tenement design competition sponsored by the Charity Organization Society in 1900.

Short joined British-born and -trained architect Herbert Spencer Styne-Harde (1873-1958), whom he met in Ware's office, and the two men established the firm of Harde & Short in 1901. The firm's first commission was from the City & Suburban Homes Company for a pair of buildings at the western end of the company's York Avenue (Avenue A) Estate (a designated New York City Landmark). The partners revised Short's competition design, incorporating features from James E. Ware's designs for the company's First Avenue Estate. The firm went on to design other apartment buildings including 45 East 66th Street (1906, a designated New York City Landmark incorporated into the Upper East Side Historic District), the exuberant Francois I style Alwyn Court (1907-09, a designated New York City Landmark), the 44-48 West 77th Street studio building in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, and the French Gothic Revival style Red House at 350 West 85th Street (1903-04, a designated New York City Landmark incorporated into the Riverside-West End Historic District Extension I).

Short also worked independently of Harde during their partnership and designed a variety of building types including the 23rd Police Precinct Station House (1907-08, a designated New York City Landmark) at 134-138 West 30th Street in Manhattan, the 108th Precinct (originally 75th Precinct) House (1903) at 5-47 50th Avenue in Queens, the Moorish style Kismet Mosque Shriner Temple (1909) at 92 Herkimer Street in Brooklyn, as well as the Renaissance Revival style mansion for Dr. Lewis.¹⁸ Short was also responsible individually and in partnership with Harde for several theaters in Brooklyn, all since demolished.¹⁹

The prominent architect R. Thomas Short's work in Manhattan is characterized by its exuberant ornament and decorative details, while the home he designed for Dr. Lewis in a restrained classical style

may reflect a conservative taste of his banker/physician client.

Conclusion

Designed by R. Thomas Short in 1907 for Dr. Maurice T. Lewis, who would found and become President of the area's largest banking institution, the Lewis House is an is a notable example of early 20th century residential architecture in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and the neighborhood's only mansion. It is prominently sited on the corner of a major avenue and stands out as a freestanding single-family dwelling in a neighborhood comprised of row houses and apartment buildings. It is an intact and fine example of the Renaissance Revival style, popular in New York City in the late 19th and early 20th century, and the work of an important New York City architect.

Report researched and written by

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Endnotes

¹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Marion Palm, *Sunrise on Sunset Park*, (New York: Xlibris Corporation, 2011), 9; Kenneth T. Jackson and John B. Manbeck, *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 200-201; these boundaries continue to change and today many consider the area between 15th Street and 24th Street Park Slope South.

² This section on the early history of Sunset Park is based on: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Sunset Park Court House Designation Report*, LP-2096, prepared by Isabel Hill (New York: City of New York, 2001), 2 and *Firehouse, Engine Company 28* (now Engine Company 228), LP-2525, prepared by Michael Owen (New York: City of New York, 2013), 2.

³ "South Brooklyn Improvements," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 22, 1887, 2.

⁴ Hill, 2.

⁵ Ancestry.com, *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line] (Lehi, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2007); U.S. Census records, 1880.

⁶ "Medical Students Graduated," *New-York Tribune*, March 23, 1893, 4; "City and Suburban News: Brooklyn," *New York Times*, April 13, 1893, 2; "Police Surgeon List," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 31, 1897, 11; Medical Society of the State of New York, *The Medical Directory of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut* (New York: The Society, 1910), 770; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 1, 1928, 36; U.S. Census records, 1900-1930.

⁷ Bay Ridge Savings Bank was renamed Anchor Savings Bank in 1968 and acquired Bushwick Savings Bank in 1969; Anchor was acquired by Dime Savings Bank of New York in 1995 which was itself acquired by Washington Mutual Bank in 2002. Washington Mutual failed in the banking crisis of 2008 and its remaining assets were acquired by J.P. Morgan Chase Bank, NA. Bob Kerstein, "New York Bank History-National Bank History: Bay Ridge Savings Bank" (www.scipophily.com/nybankhistorb.htm, accessed February 21, 2018); "Anchor Savings Bank, FSB," US Federal Reserve System National Information Center (<https://www.ffiec.gov/nicpubweb/nicweb/InsitutionalHistory.aspx>, accessed February 23, 2018)

⁸ "Bay Ridge Savings Bank in New Home," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 25, 1927, 19. The building, somewhat altered, is now a branch of J. P. Morgan Chase.

⁹ "Millions in Cash End Bay Ridge Bank Run," *New York Times*, August 16, 1929, 1.

¹⁰ Dr. Maurice Lewis Dies at 64 after 11 Weeks Illness," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 9, 1931, 15; "Dr. Maurice

Lewis, Banker, Dies at 64," *New York Times*, July 9, 1931, 23.

¹¹ Lewis purchased the 100 x 100 lot at the corner of 55th Street and 4th Avenue adjacent to his home at 414 55th Street in 1899. The first building on the lot was a stable for his prized horses in 1902 which raised the ire of some of his neighbors. "Much Brushing on Brooklyn Speedway," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 10, 1902, 7; "Real Estate Market," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 12, 1899, 12; "Dr. Lewis' New Stable," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 31, 1902, 3.

¹² "Dr. Lewis' New Stable," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 31, 1902, 3.

¹³ "Stable for Fast Pacer Stirs up the Neighbors," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 8, 1902, 47.

¹⁴ "Real Estate Records, New Buildings," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 20, 1907, 18.

¹⁵ Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.U.S. Census Records.

¹⁶ NYC Department of Finance, Conveyance Records, 1931.

¹⁷ ACRIS, Department of Finance, NYC.

¹⁸ Ancestry.com, *New York, State Federal Naturalization Records, 1794-1940* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2013; Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), 37, 69; LPC, *Red House, 350 West 85th Street Designation Report (LP-1265)* (New York: City of New York, 1982) prepared by Donald Presa and Barbara Cohen; U.S. Census records, 1900-1940; "Richard Thomas Short," *Find A Grave* (<http://www.findagrave.com>, accessed February 23, 2018); Norval White and Elliot Willensky with Fran Leadon, *AIA Guide to New York City*, Fifth edition (New York: Oxford University Press).

¹⁹ "New Amusement Center in Brooklyn," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, July 24, 2105, 133; "Two Theaters in Bedford Section," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, May 19, 1917, 703; "Theatres and Their Decorations," *Architecture and Buildings* 43 (May 1911), 343-346.

Findings and Designation

Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House

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 Dr. Maurice T. Lewis 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 Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House was designed in 1907 by the prominent architect R. Thomas Short, of the firm of Harde & Short; that it was designed and constructed for Dr. Maurice T. Lewis a physician and later a founding member and president of the Bay Ridge Savings Bank (established 1909); that the house is an excellent example of the Renaissance Revival style popular in the late-19th and early-20th centuries; that the house's tri-partite street-facing facades combine rusticated limestone bases with brick upper stories, a formal entrance with Tuscan-columned portico and double-leaf door, windows with flared lintels with keystones or full stone surrounds, a Palladian window with segmental-arched pediment with carved tympanum, and a deep modillioned cornice typical of the style; that it is an excellent example of a free-standing, single-family house of the period; that as a rare example of a mansion in a neighborhood of row houses and multi-family dwellings it is significant to the development history of Sunset Park.

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 Dr. Maurice T. Lewis House, 404 55th Street (aka 402-404 55th Street, 5501 4th Avenue), Borough of Brooklyn and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 831, Lot 8, in part,

beginning at the northeast corner of the property line of lot 8, southerly along the eastern property line of lot 8 approximately 65 feet and 4 inches to a point on a line extending easterly from the southernmost facade of the building, and encompassing such facade, then westerly along said line and the southernmost facade of the building to the western property line of lot 8, northerly along the western property line of lot 8 to the northern property line of lot 8, then easterly to the place of beginning as its Landmark Site

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

Frederick Bland
Wellington Chen
Michael Devonshire
Michael Goldblum
Anne Holford-Smith
Jeanne Lutfy
Adi Shamir-Baron
Kim Vauss
Commissioners



404 55TH Street
LPC, 1939



404 55th Street
LPC, 1987



55th Street Facade

J. Baldwin, February, 2018



Entrance Portico

J. Baldwin, February, 2018



North and West Facade
J. Baldwin, February, 2018



South and West Corner
J. Baldwin, February, 2018

