

167-171 JOHN STREET BUILDING, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1849, completed 1850; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 74, Lot 8.

On October 19, 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 167-171 John Street Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 42). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In 1849-50, when this building was erected, this part of what is now John Street was known as Burling Slip. This building was 31-35 Burling Slip. The architect/builder cannot be ascertained, but the property was assessed to A. A. Low in 1850 (for \$50,000), and we may assume that it was built for him.

Abiel Abbot Low (1811-1893) is an extremely important figure in New York history. At a time when the China trade was most important in American commerce, it was the firm of A. A. Low & Sons which dominated the New York China trade. It is of interest to note that Low built his home across the East River on a site from which he could proudly watch his great clipper ships, his offices, and his warehouses. (This house, 2-3 Pierrepont Place, still stands, is included in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, and in fact is now in process of restoration. The Brooklyn Heights Promenade is still a superb vantage point for the activity and the old buildings in and around Burling Slip.)

167-171 John Street is associated not only with the Low family, but also the very illustrious Delano family. According to the City Directory, Franklin, Frederick and Warren Delano occupied a part of the building (35 Burling Slip) in the 1850's and used it as their counting house. Warren Delano and A. A. Low had clerked together in Canton as young men and sustained their friendship later. He was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's grandfather.

In addition to its historical associations this is a beautiful building. It is as simple as a building can be - so simple that one accustomed to associate simplicity only with contemporary design may easily overlook it. It bears close examination, however, for its perfection is neither obvious nor accidental, but consists in an exceedingly refined handling of a very few elements. Two instances will suffice: (1) The space between the third and fourth story windows is, as it should be, less than that between the second and third story windows; but since this is a granite building, and there are only two blocks between each window, this deviation could only be achieved by cutting the blocks smaller; the deviation is just the right amount: if it were less, it would be ineffective; if it were more, the difference in size of the building blocks would be obtrusive. And (2) try to imagine the fifth-story windows any other size.

The ground floor of this building has been altered. Its restoration would be a relatively simple matter. Granite-fronted commercial buildings like this were once common in New York. Now, it and 170-176 John Street (LP-0074), across the Slip, may be the only survivors.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 167-171 John Street Building 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 building at 167-171 John Street is a perfect example of New York Greek Revival commercial architecture, of granite, in particular, which is very rare, that it is in a good state of preservation, that it is rich in important historical associations, and that it is an exemplary piece of simple, refined design.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 167-171 John Street Building, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 74, Lot 8, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.