

GEORGE W. VANDERBILT RESIDENCE, 647 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1902-1905; architects Hunt & Hunt.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 71.

On March 8, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the George W. Vanderbilt Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This distinguished building, 647 Fifth Avenue, located between 51st and 52nd Streets, is one of the few reminders of the residential character and Beaux-Arts splendor of this section of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century. Built with 645 Fifth Avenue as a pair known as the "Marble Twins", the building was commissioned in 1902 by George W. Vanderbilt. That Richard H. and Joseph H. Hunt of the firm of Hunt & Hunt were chosen to design this pair of houses is hardly surprising for a longstanding relationship existed between the Vanderbilts--as patrons--with the Hunts--as architects. Richard Morris Hunt, father of Richard and Joseph and New York's most prominent architect in the late 19th century, had, from the 1870s on, designed most of the great mansions built for the Vanderbilts of his generation. Hunt & Hunt continued the families' tradition.

In the later 19th century the Vanderbilts began to erect a series of handsome and opulent residences along Fifth Avenue. They are said to have spent millions of dollars in purchasing land along Fifth Avenue in order to protect their residences from business encroachment. In 1879 William K. Vanderbilt commissioned a house at 660 Fifth Avenue. Designed by Richard Morris Hunt, it was, at the time it was built, one of the most elaborate houses in Manhattan and the very first in the French Renaissance style which later became so popular. His brother, Cornelius, at the same time had begun construction of his great French chateau at 57th Street and Fifth Avenue, which was designed by George B. Post, a noted architect and former student of Richard M. Hunt. William H. Vanderbilt, father of William K. and Cornelius, was also building his twin brownstone houses between 51st and 52nd Streets on the west side of Fifth Avenue in the same years. Designed by the decorating firm, Herter Brothers, they were considered imposing but of less than exceptional architectural merit; in fact, the "Twin Houses" soon became known as the "Twin Horrors." Two of William's daughters, Mrs. Elliott F. Shepard and Mrs. William D. Sloane lived in them for many years. The site directly across the street from them on Fifth Avenue was occupied by the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum until the Church sold the property in 1900. Two years later a large portion of this property formerly owned by the Church was acquired by the New York Realty Corporation, a Vanderbilt family concern.

The corner property at 52nd Street was sold by the realty corporation to Morton F. Plant, the banker, in 1903. His house, which is now Cartier, Inc., a designated New York City Landmark, was completed in 1905. The "Marble Twins" at 645 and 647 Fifth Avenue, commissioned by George W. Vanderbilt, were begun in 1902 on the recently acquired site and completed in 1905. William D. Sloane, the husband of Emily Vanderbilt who was the sister of George W. and William K. Vanderbilt, soon purchased 645 Fifth Avenue. The house was occupied by William and Emily Sloane's daughter Lila and her husband William B. Osgood Field for more than twenty years. Although George W. Vanderbilt was the first owner of No. 647, he never lived in it. By 1904 his brother, William K. Vanderbilt had purchased the house.

George Washington Vanderbilt (1862-1914), unlike his brother William, was not deeply involved in the family business concerns. Characterized at the time of his death as a "traveller, scholar, and scientific farmer," he devoted himself

to art collecting, the study of languages and philosophy, and the administration of his vast estate, Biltmore, near Asheville, North Carolina. Vanderbilt, when not travelling abroad, preferred Biltmore to New York, and spent much of his time there, occupied with stockbreeding, forestry, and furnishing of his great chateau which had been designed by Richard Morris Hunt.

William Kissam Vanderbilt (1849-1920), with his brother Cornelius (1843-1899), was the chief manager of the family fortune. He served as a director in the Vanderbilt railroad companies and other corporations. An enthusiastic sportsman, he raced horses and was a yachtsman. He was also an active philanthropist and art collector. William was the first Vanderbilt to commission a residence by Richard Morris Hunt--660 Fifth Avenue. His brothers Cornelius and George followed suit.

The first and only occupant of 647 Fifth Avenue as a residence was the noted realtor Robert Goelet, a Vanderbilt relation by marriage. It became his house after his marriage to Elsie Whelen in 1904. Robert Goelet (1880-1966) was a member of the prominent New York Goelet family. Of Dutch descent the Goelets immigrated to America in the late 17th century and Peter Goelet, a third generation descendant, is credited with amassing the fortune which later generations greatly enlarged. The family fortune was based upon New York City real estate holdings and reputedly the Goelet family at one time owned some fifty-five acres between Union Square and 48th Street on the east side of Manhattan. Robert Goelet was an able financier and real estate developer and director of numerous corporations, among them the New York Trust Co., City Investing Co., the Fifth Avenue Corporation, and Chemical Bank. He graduated from Harvard University in 1903 and married the following year. This marriage ended in divorce and Goelet moved from No. 647. After fighting in the First World War in France, he was remarried to the Princess Fernanda Rocchi Riabouchinsky. The couple were divorced several years later, and in 1925 Goelet married Roberta Willard. Described by the New York Times (2/7/66) as a man of "taste and wealth," Goelet was a noted wine connoisseur and an active member of both New York and Newport society. The great family house, "Ochre Court" at Newport, which was designed in 1888 by Richard Morris Hunt, was owned by Goelet. He donated this mansion to Salve Regina College and later lived in another handsome Newport house, "Champ Soleil." At the time of his death, Goelet's New York residence was at 4 East 66th Street.

In 1917, the same year that Morton F. Plant sold his 651 Fifth Avenue residence to Cartier, Inc., No. 647 was acquired by Gimpel & Wildenstein, the world-renowned art dealers, later Wildenstein & Co., and the building was skillfully altered for commercial use. It is now occupied by the offices of Olympic Airlines.

The architectural firm of Hunt & Hunt was established in 1901--only a year before the "Marble Twins" were designed. George W. Vanderbilt probably chose the Hunt brothers to design these residences owing to his association with their father, who had designed Vanderbilt's house at Biltmore, now a National Historic Landmark. Richard Howland Hunt (1862-1931) pursued his architectural studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He was trained as a draftsman in his father's office where he later became an associate. As his father's successor, Richard had to complete the drawings and work on the central unit of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, facing Fifth Avenue, which had not been finished at the time of Richard M. Hunt's death in 1895. The younger brother, Joseph Howland Hunt (1870-1924), graduated from the School of Architecture at Columbia University in 1894 and continued his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, after which he travelled extensively throughout Europe. Upon his return to America in 1901, he joined in partnership with his brother Richard, establishing the firm of Hunt & Hunt in New York City. This highly successful firm designed a great number of distinguished country residences at Newport, Tuxedo Park, and on Long Island for such notable families as the Vanderbilts, Goulds, Belmonts and Goelets, as well as many educational and institutional buildings. Among the commissions of Hunt & Hunt were the Sixty-Seventh Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, and the Old Slip Police Station. They also designed Kissam Hall at Vanderbilt University, and Quintard and Hoffman Halls at Suwanee University. Both Richard and Joseph were active in the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and in the Architectural League of New York, as well as members of

many other art and architectural organizations. As prominent figures in the architectural profession, they were awarded many honors during their distinguished careers.

The very handsome French Beaux-Arts town house, which Hunt & Hunt created at 647 Fifth Avenue, is executed in the style of Louis XV and harmonizes well with its neighbor, the former Morton F. Plant residence (now Cartier, Inc.). The first floor was originally treated as an "English basement" with round-arched openings, rusticated facing with vermiculation, and heavy paired console brackets which supported a second story balcony. Today a wide plate glass show window, flanked by double doors and enframed by rusticated stone work, has been substituted. This storefront accords effectively with a similar storefront alteration made by Cartier.

Above this floor a shallow balcony with a delicate wrought-iron railing, carried on four console brackets, takes the place of the original stone balustered balcony. A monumental composite order of finely carved fluted pilasters which links the second and third stories is crowned by a very simple entablature. An interesting feature of this house is the manner in which the architects ended the range of pilasters at the north side of the facade. A broad smooth pier, cutting off all but a narrow slice of fluted pilaster, visually expresses the thickness of the end wall on the exterior of the building, thus giving a "mannerist" emphasis to the termination. The windows, set between pilasters, have splayed lintels with keystones at both floors. The tall second story casement windows open onto the balcony, while the third story windows have horizontal panels in the stonework above and below them, and window sills resting on simple corbel blocks.

The top two stories above the entablature were the result of a 1917 alteration for Gimpel & Wildenstein which increased the height of the building by one floor. The original imposing stone rosettes remain in place at the fourth story, and the windows installed at the fourth and fifth stories resemble the originals. Stone panels set above the rosettes effectively unite the two stories. A simple dentiled roof cornice, above the fifth floor, replaces the heavier one which had originally crowned the fourth floor; however, the original stone balustrade which surmounted the roof cornice was happily retained and simply moved up one story.

This house, originally one of an identical pair with No. 645, remained standing when Best & Co. built a large department store at the northeast corner of 51st Street, replacing the Union Club and No. 645. When the Olympic Tower was built on the Best & Co. site, a three-story annex was also built adjoining 647 Fifth Avenue.

When the 647 Fifth Avenue residence was completed, the surrounding neighborhood was an elegant and fashionable area of Beaux-Arts splendor. The magnificent University Club, designed by McKim, Mead & White, stood two blocks away on Fifth Avenue. The handsome Union Club, now demolished, was adjacent to the "Marble Twins." The St. Regis Hotel was soon to be completed at 55th Street and Fifth Avenue, as was the great Plaza Hotel a few blocks north. These distinguished structures are only a few of the many which once lined this portion of Fifth Avenue. No. 647 survives as a handsome companion to No. 651, the Plant residence, and is the last reminder of the lavish Vanderbilt mansions which once enhanced Fifth Avenue.

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 George W. Vanderbilt Residence 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 George W. Vanderbilt Residence is a distinguished example of the French Louis XV style designed by the prominent architectural firm of Hunt & Hunt, that it is one of the few impressive town houses to survive on this section of Fifth Avenue, that it has been adeptly altered to serve as a commercial building, that it is a handsome companion to its neighbor, No. 651, Cartier, Inc., and that it is the only residence commissioned by the Vanderbilts to remain standing on Fifth Avenue and as such is a last reminder of the splendor of their great Fifth Avenue mansions.

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 George W. Vanderbilt Residence, 647 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 71, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.