

FORMER LORD & TAYLOR BUILDING, 901 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1869-70; architect James H. Giles.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 848, Lot 68.

On September 20, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Former Lord & Taylor Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the hearing. The Commission has received several communications in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

One of the most impressive stores in the late 19th-century shopping district known as "The Ladies' Mile", the former Lord & Taylor building stands at the southwest corner of Broadway and 20th Street and, with its picturesque corner tower, still dominates its site today. Handsomely designed in the French Second Empire style by the architect James H. Giles, the store was constructed with the most up-to-date materials of the time, cast iron and glass, and hailed as strikingly modern and elegant when it was completed in 1870.

The prestigious firm of Lord & Taylor began as a small drygoods store in lower Manhattan in the early 19th century. Samuel Lord was born in Saddleworth, England, and worked in an iron foundry there owned by James Taylor. At the age of 21, Lord married Taylor's daughter, Mary, and shortly afterward the couple emigrated to America. In 1826, Lord opened a drygoods store at 47 Catherine Street and soon made his wife's cousin, George Washington Taylor, his partner in the new venture. The store was an immediate success and in 1832 the firm moved to more spacious quarters on Catherine Street. The prosperity of the Lord & Taylor store enabled Samuel Lord to purchase an extensive country estate in the village of Newtown; now Elmhurst, Queens. Lord lived there with his wife and eight children and, by constantly adding to his property, eventually became one of the largest land owners in the area. One of his many building projects in Newtown was Clermont Terrace, a row of residences erected near his estate; one of these houses still stands today.

While Samuel Lord managed the selling and buying for the firm, his partner, George Taylor (1802-79) handled the financial matters. Taylor was credited with having a special talent "for figures and could carry the whole business of the young firm to a penny in his memory" (New York Times, March 25, 1879). After having amassed a considerable fortune, Taylor retired to Manchester, England in the 1850s, where during his latter years, he reputedly made it a practice to donate one quarter of his income to charity.

The extremely successful firm of Lord & Taylor continued to expand and in 1853 moved to a larger store at Grand and Chrystie Streets. This new building, the third in the history of Lord & Taylor stores, was skillfully designed with a large central rotunda crowned by a dome. Soon, however, this space also proved too small and another "branch" of the store was opened at Grand Street and Broadway in 1860. The rapidly expanding business of the firm led Samuel Lord to take in two new partners -- his oldest son, John T. Lord, and John S. Lyle, who had been the first errand boy to work in the store. In 1866, Samuel Lord retired to his native England, where he delighted in his hobby of horticulture. At his death, Lord left a fortune of nine million dollars.

As the development of Manhattan extended northward during the second half of the 19th century, the commercial center also moved uptown and the area between 8th and 23rd Streets, Broadway and Sixth Avenue gradually became the principal shopping district. Beginning in the 1860s, a number of the finest department stores in the city moved to Broadway, in this newly fashionable section which was soon to be known as "The Ladies' Mile." One of the first to move northward was the A.T. Stewart store, erected in 1862, which stood at Broadway and 10th Street. A few years later, in 1868, construction began on the massive Arnold, Constable & Co. store, which still stands today at the southwest corner of

Broadway and 19th Street. The next year, in keeping with the northward shift in commercial activity, the new Lord & Taylor store was begun across the street. Designed on a grand scale in the most striking architectural styles, these new stores, many of cast iron, were the work of the city's most prominent architects. Eventually all of the most important retail firms in the city, including B. Altman's, Macy's, W. & J. Sloane and Siegel-Cooper & Co. owned impressive emporiums in this district.

The Lord & Taylor store, which originally extended 83 feet along Broadway, was widely acclaimed as its opening in 1870 and its modern design was praised by the New York Times (Nov. 27, 1870): "It is wholly of iron and exhibits better, perhaps, than any previous attempt the capacity of iron for effects of its own in building."

Cast iron was an extremely popular architectural material during the second half of the 19th century and was particularly suited to the needs of a commercial building. It had been used in New York City as early as the 1840s, when the famed inventor, James Bogardus, experimented with the material and advanced the use of iron for structural supporting systems. The Architectural Iron Works of Daniel D. Badger greatly popularized the use of cast iron for facades and gained a worldwide reputation, shipping prefabricated iron parts to many foreign ports, including Nova Scotia and Cuba. Several facades cast in Badger's iron foundry are among the finest in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, where the largest group of cast-iron structures anywhere in the world still stands. The many advantages of cast iron were quickly recognized and adapted to commercial buildings. Not only was it less expensive to design an elaborate facade in cast iron than in masonry, but the erection process was also far speedier, due to the relative ease of assembling pre-fabricated parts. The greatest advantage of cast iron for commercial purposes was the large window area made possible by the slender iron structural system of the facade which permitted larger openings than the traditional masonry piers. The large windows of the upper floors provided much-needed light on the interior, while those on the ground floor served as eye-catching display windows and added a whole new dimension to shopping. The eight large display windows along the original Broadway facade of the Lord & Taylor store were each sixteen feet high and seven feet wide and quickly became one of the chief attractions of the building.

The Lord & Taylor building was erected on land owned by two different families who leased the property to the firm. The three lots along Broadway belonged to New York's distinguished Goelet family. Peter Goelet (1800-79) lived across the street in a brownstone at Broadway and 19th Street and reputedly refused to sell any of the land which had once comprised his family's farm. In the lease for the 20th Street lot, which was owned by the Badeau family, it was specified that the building erected on this corner lot be similar in height to that constructed by the Goelets along Broadway.

The Goelets and the firm of Lord & Taylor commissioned the architect James H. Giles to design the store, which he treated as one single building. A resident of Brooklyn, Giles had his architectural office at 160 Fulton Street in lower Manhattan. Apparently he was responsible for a number of other cast-iron buildings, since his name occurs several times in Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works catalogue. In addition to designing storefronts in lower Manhattan, he is also listed as the architect of a cast-iron building which is still standing in Mobile, Alabama. Erected for Daniels, Elgin & Co., this handsome structure was constructed before the Lord & Taylor store. Giles also designed residential buildings, including a row of tenements of 1870 in East Harlem.

The design of the Lord & Taylor store was an immediate success and displayed many of the most up-to-date architectural features. The boldness of the cast-iron facade and the many large windows, together with the prominent mansard roof and striking corner tower, created a particularly imposing effect. At the original Broadway facade, a large arched entrance gave great distinction to the building. The architect James H. Giles took full advantage of the site by creating a diagonal corner, which he accentuated with a tall tower.

On the interior, the magnificent hall of the first floor was executed in black walnut and ash. At the rear, a "dark room," which was fast becoming the fashion in first class stores of the time, was used for the display of materials by gaslight. The two steam elevators of the store were considered particularly elegant when installed in 1870. A print of the new elevator filled with dignified women shoppers appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, (Nov. 1, 1873), with a glowing description of the new mechanism:

[+] operates with perfect ease and safety; is as luxurious as the grand salon of the first class steamboats, and is a saving of strength in shopping altogether incalculable to anyone outside of a city, in which altitude, rather than grand space, is the principal architectural consideration.

At the second floor, ready-made clothes were sold. Since the clothes previously sold by the store had been custom-made, the ready-made items were seen as extremely modern at the time of the opening of this Lord & Taylor store and as a great innovation in the retail trade.

Despite the tremendous size of the cast-iron store, the firm nonetheless soon outgrew its new building. Shortly after 1870, an addition was erected on another lot owned by the Goelets at 10 East 20th Street. This building, also of cast iron, was designed to harmonize with the original structure. The firm continued to expand over the years and erected buildings on 19th and 20th Streets to meet its needs. In 1903 another extension was constructed through to Fifth Avenue, soon to be a major shopping street of the city.

As the city developed further north, the commercial district shifted accordingly. In 1914, Lord & Taylor moved uptown to its present building at Fifth Avenue and 38th Street. Many other department stores followed shortly afterward. When Lord & Taylor vacated the Broadway and 20th Street store, the Goelets still owned that part of the building constructed by an earlier generation of the family. In 1914, the Broadway section of the store and 10 East 20th Street, also owned by the Goelets, were sealed off from the corner section -- the original part of the former Lord & Taylor store which remains today -- and treated as a separate building.

The former Lord & Taylor building, four stories with attic, is dominated by its picturesque diagonal corner tower with mansard roof which recalls the handsome pavilions of French Second Empire architecture. The tower is flanked by a single bay facing Broadway and by the long 20th Street facade which is crowned by a mansard roof with dormers. Above the altered ground floor, the cast-iron facade displays a profusion of decorative features skillfully combined to create a rich effect. The play of projections and recessions throughout the facade gives the building a highly ornate and distinctive character, achieved by the contrast of light and shadow.

The tall corner tower is set above the first story on an oblique angle and rises a full story above the mansard roof. Cast-iron pilasters with modified Corinthian capitals flank each story of the tower. These pilasters recur throughout the facade and vary in design. At the second story, they are rusticated with alternating panels displaying pellets, while at the upper stories a round-arched vertical panel occurs above the pellet panels. At the tower, the triple window bays of the three central stories are composed of a wide central window flanked by narrow side windows opening onto balconies with low railings of delicate ironwork. The three-sided balconies at the second and fourth stories contrast effectively with the third story curved balcony which follows the form of the second story bay window below it. The windows of the second story curved bay are set behind deeply recessed arches, which in their design are reminiscent of corbeled arches, carried on cast-iron pilasters. The window enframements have stilted flat arches with curved ends supported on slender engaged Corinthian columns. At the upper stories of the tower, the windows are set in a flush wall. The treatment of the windows at the third story is quite similar to that below; however, it is subtly varied at the fourth story. The lintels above these windows consist of flat arches with corbel-form ends, while the inner flat arches of the enframements have deep curvilinear stilts. Simple ornament embellishes the corbels where they meet the lintels. A cornice with closely spaced brackets extends around the entire facade above the fourth story and is surmounted, at the tower, by a full attic story with five tall, narrow windows. At either side of these windows, diminutive engaged columns support stilted elliptical arches, ornamented with delicate curvilinear forms at the spandrels. The deeply recessed typanums of these arches also display delicate decorative motifs. Above a cornice with closely spaced diminutive brackets, a tall mansard roof of slate in a fish scale pattern, handsomely terminates the tower and is crowned by an elaborate iron cresting. Originally a large round-arched dormer window was set above the cornice behind a railing which once extended around the top of the tower.

At the 20th Street side of the building, the four-story facade is composed of a long center section with windows bays at either end flanked by pilasters. The design of the windows at the 20th Street facade and at the single bay on the

Broadway side is similar to that of the tower at the third story. Curvilinear ornament at the spandrels of the lintels gives a delicate quality to the design, further enhanced by the low railings with small narrow arches beneath these windows. A curved balcony, from which the railing has been removed, serves the central windows of the third story. The bracketed roof cornice above the fourth story of the store projects slightly above the central section of the 20th Street facade. The ends of the mansard roof above this central section are set off by paneled uprights topped by finials. This roof, characteristic of the French Second Empire style, has three flat-arched dormer windows with arched pediments and is crowned by an ornate iron cresting. Above the westernmost bay of the 20th Street facade, a small dormer with a triangular pediment adds further interest to the distinctive roofline of this handsome building.

Today the former Lord & Taylor building is a vivid reminder of the architectural splendor of "The Ladies' Mile," where many of the commercial emporiums of the day were built in the grandest and most impressive styles. The elaborately ornamented cast-iron facade of the store and its prominent, picturesque corner tower with mansard roof create an effectively imposing design, striking both in its scale and grandeur.

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 Former Lord & Taylor 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 Former Lord & Taylor Building is an impressive cast-iron structure handsomely designed in the French Second Empire style by the architect James H. Giles; that it was constructed with the most up-to-date materials of the time, cast iron and glass, which were particularly suited to the design of commercial buildings; that its picturesque corner tower with tall mansard roof gives the building a highly distinctive and striking character; that it was originally the store of one of the most prestigious retail firms in the city; and that today the former Lord & Taylor Building is a vivid reminder of the great architectural splendor of "The Ladies' Mile."

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 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 Former Lord & Taylor Building, 901 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 848, Lot 68, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.