

Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 11, 1979, Designation List 127
LP-1025

KNICKERBOCKER CLUB BUILDING, 2 East 62nd Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1913-1915; architects Delano & Aldrich.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1376, Lot 69.

On January 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Knickerbocker Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing was continued to March 13, 1979 (Item No. 2). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The building's owner submitted a letter in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Recognized as one of the finest examples of the neo-Federal style in New York City, the Knickerbocker Club Building was built between 1913 and 1915 by the fashionable architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich. Occupying a prominent lot at the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 62nd Street, the building was designed to fit comfortably into the surrounding residential neighborhood as well as to maintain the club's historic presence on the avenue. The restrained elegance of this, the third home of the venerable men's club provides a fitting setting for the institution's prestigious members.

Organized on October 31, 1871 the Knickerbocker Club was founded as a reaction against the relaxation of admissions standards which, following the Civil War, had changed the character of the time-honored Union Club. Included among the eighteen founding members were such prestigious New Yorkers as Alexander Hamilton, Jr., Alonzo C. Monson, August Belmont, John L. Cadwalader and John Jacob Astor. The war had proved a mighty impetus to an already healthy economy and the proliferation of new wealth had a dramatic effect on New York City's social structure. Bowing to the pressures of the day, the Union Club unquestionably the leading club in the city, expanded its membership. Many of the club's associates were opposed to the directions which were being undertaken and sought to create a new club modelled on the Union Club of former times. The men who undertook this project clearly had been considering the matter very carefully. By the time of the official founding on Halloween of 1871, a constitution had been drafted, a list of prospective members and officers had been compiled and information regarding a possible clubhouse had been gathered. Subsequent meetings were most often held at the city's most fashionable restaurant, Delmonico's, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 14th Street. Here the founding members ironed out organizational procedures and finally selected a name. From a slate which included such entries as Crescent, Half Moon and Federal the final selection of Knickerbocker was made. The choice like the spirit of the club was understandably reflective of the city's early history. Writing many years after the publication of his celebrated Knickerbocker's History of New York (1809), Washington Irving wrote:

When I find after a lapse of nearly forty years the haphazard production of my youth still cherished among them [New Yorkers] - when I find its very name become a 'household word' and used to give the home stamp to everything recommended for popular acceptance, such as Knickerbocker societies, Knickerbocker insurance companies, Knickerbocker steamboats, Knickerbocker omnibuses, Knickerbocker bread and Knickerbocker ice - and when I find New Yorkers of Dutch descent priding themselves upon being 'genuine Knickerbockers' - I please myself with the persuasion that I have struck the right chord.¹

The Knickerbocker Club established its first clubhouse in the former home of William B. Duncan at 249 Fifth Avenue at the corner of 28th Street. In 1871 when most of the city's life was centered on 14th Street, the establishment of a club at 28th Street was definitely considered a move uptown. Most of the other leading clubs were spread out along Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to the residential neighborhoods around 23rd Street. From its establishment the Knickerbocker Club gained a wide reputation for being a very exclusive institution. However, the truth of the matter lay at least in part with the troubled economy which helped to discourage membership applications during the late 1870s. The growth of the club did not appreciably falter under the economic pressure and the Knickerbocker soon became the favorite haunt of 240 of the city's most privileged gentlemen who were content to abstain from such vulgar pursuits as gambling and pipe smoking while on the premises. By 1881 general discontentment with the clubhouse and club leadership began to erode the members' enthusiasm. News of this unrest was carefully screened from the press but the decision to move four blocks up Fifth Avenue to 319 at the corner of 32nd Street was soon revealed. It was here that the Knickerbocker Club comfortably established itself for 32 years in a handsome brownstone with a much-loved bay window over looking the activity of Fifth Avenue.

Following three decades of hard use, the clubhouse at 319 Fifth Avenue began to show the strain of the years. Rising repair and maintenance costs coupled with such inconveniences as the lack of an elevator, prompted the first discussions concerning the move to a third location. Over the years the character of the area around 32nd Street had also begun to deteriorate. By 1909 when the members of the Knickerbocker Club began pondering a move, the city's fashionable residential district had extended north to the region on the eastern edge of Central Park. In the 1880s the elegant Vanderbilt chateaux had characterized Fifth Avenue from 51st to 58th Streets and as early as 1891 the newly established Metropolitan Club, another off shoot of the Union Club, was planning a luxurious clubhouse at 62nd Street. This newly developed region would soon boast the homes of such celebrated New Yorkers as John Jacob Astor, Mrs. M. Hartley Dodge and Hamilton Fish, and prior to World War I nearly 70 mansions came to line the mile and a half along Fifth Avenue from 59th to 90th Streets. It is therefore quite surprising that the members of the Knickerbocker Club, although agreed on the necessity of finding a new clubhouse, considered an available parcel at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 62nd Street too far uptown. The club's site committee was sent back to pursue a location below 59th Street, but these efforts were bound to fail as there were no sites available.

As early as 1911 the attractive site at the corner of 62nd Street on which stood the limestone chateau of the Princess del Drago was recommended as the third location of the Knickerbocker Club. The old house with its distinctive corner tower and Gothic ornament had been built by August Schmid, the owner of the profitable Lion Brewery. Following Schmid's death in 1889 his wife Josephine took over the business and increased the company's profits five fold. In 1909 Mrs. Schmid married the young Don Giovanni del Drago, the heir of an old Italian family and the Fifth Avenue house was virtually abandoned. The Princess del Drago sold the property to Robert E. Dowling, President of the City Investing Company in 1912. Subsequently on June 13, 1913, the Knickerbocker Club purchased the impressive Gothic chateau from Dowling and during the ensuing year they also acquired the house of William Lanman Bull, located on the avenue immediately to the south.² The two parcels had a combined frontage of 75 feet on Fifth Avenue and 125 feet on 62nd Street and were assessed at \$780,000. In February of 1914 it was announced that work had begun to tear down the two Fifth Avenue residences and that the fashionable architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich had been selected to design the new clubhouse.

The success of the new clubhouse design can be attributed to two men: William Adams Delano (1874-1960) and John Irving Downey (1877-1961), the builder. A recipient of the coveted Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, William A. Delano was born in the parsonage of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church of which his grandfather was pastor. From New York Delano moved with his family to Philadelphia where his father became partner in charge of the area branch of Brown Brothers, a prominent banking concern. It was during the construction of the family's house in Bryn Mawr that young William Delano was impressed with the commanding ways of the local architect and became determined on a career in architecture. Later on at Yale, Delano studied drawing under John F. Weir and upon graduation in 1895 he attended Columbia's School of Architecture, studying under William R. Ware for two years. With this solid training behind him Delano secured a job as draftsman with the enterprising young architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings and gained much needed experience working on the competition drawings for the New York Public Library and the National Academy of Design. Both Carrère & Hastings had trained at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and it soon became apparent to Delano that a year of study under the disciplined French curriculum was what he now needed. Upon completion of five years of study in Paris, Delano returned to New York in 1903. At this time Delano was tempted to join the firm in partnership with another Ecole graduate Chester Aldrich. From their rather humble beginnings in a third-floor walk up on 41st Street the firm of Delano & Aldrich grew to be one of the most highly respected in the country. Following residential commissions for some of the country's most powerful citizens such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Otto H. Kahn and Vincent Astor, the firm's work took on a more international character with their design for the American Embassy in Paris. In 1949, nine years after Aldrich's death, Delano was appointed architectural consultant to the Commission of Renovation of the White House. A member of a well-established New York family Delano was a member of the Century, Knickerbocker, Coffee House and Piping Rock Clubs. It was from this comfortable vantage point that he so clearly understood the aspirations and needs of early 20th century New York Society. Spurning the open space planning of most modern architecture Delano hailed the privacy afforded by the more traditional

house plan.³ Trained in the venerable Ecole under a system which continued the Renaissance appreciation for order, proportion, balance, and precedent, Delano reached back into the Renaissance - derived architectural heritage of this country's Georgian and Federal periods for inspiration.

Interestingly enough the builder who worked so sympathetically with Delano came from a remarkably similar background. John I. Downey received a degree from Yale in 1897 and until 1927 he was engaged in the city's construction industry. In 1915 he was listed in the city directory as the president of John I. Downey, Inc. builders at 410 West 34th Street. As early as 1901, however, Downey began branching out into banking. At this time he was made a director of the Astor National Bank. By 1927 the Astor had merged with the Bankers Trust Company and during this year Downey moved out of the construction business and into the position of Vice-president at Bankers Trust. From 1941-48 Downey served as president of the Fifth Avenue Bank. Like Delano, Downey was a well-established member of New York society. Not only did he serve as a president of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church but he was a member of various social organizations including the Union Club, Union League Club, Century Association, University Club and Yale Club. It is interesting to note that Delano and Downey were both members of the Century Association and following their association on the Knickerbocker Club Building they worked together on the construction of the Union Club in 1935. Downey, by this time out of the construction industry, served on the building committee which advised the architects Delano & Aldrich.

The pressures of urban growth during the last half of the 19th century had not only a significant effect on such well-established social institutions as the private men's clubs but also on the architectural professions answer to the changing needs of the city's inhabitants. During the years following the Civil War architects found themselves with a multitude of styles to choose from but with no singular direction in their approach to contemporary design. Increased world travel brought American business leaders in touch with European architecture and many returned with an appreciation for the order and grace of European design which was based on the clear cut principles of the Renaissance. In response to this new search for architectural direction, aspiring American architects began flocking to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris to learn the classical approach to design, based as it was on a thorough study of historic precedent. In 1876 the nation's Centennial celebration had reawakened the country's interest in its own history. Some of the nation's young designers returning from the Ecole found the Renaissance-derived architecture of America's Georgian and Federal periods especially appealing. Following an extensive trip through New England in 1877 to study Colonial architecture, the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White led the way in the development of the style we now call Colonial Revival.

By the 1890's there was a popular base of appreciation for America's past which with its unspoiled simplicity provided a poignant contrast to the complex and increasingly troubled contemporary urban scene. Although neither Delano nor Aldrich had ever worked for McKim, Mead & White, they took a strong interest in the revival of the Georgian and Federal styles and helped to transport the popularity of these styles well into the 20th century. The firm had a particularly fine understanding of the new historically-derived mode and their subsequent success was based on their unique synthesis of French Beaux-Arts principles and colonial precedent. In 1923 William Lawrence Bottomley, another leading Colonial Revival architect, gave a more specific analysis of the work of Delano & Aldrich.

Both in the plans and the elevations, whether of a facade of the side of a room, one feels a fine relationship of parts. From the point of view of decoration, there is a small amount of ornament, very telling because well placed and brought into strong accent by contrast with simple planes and wide wall spaces. The beautiful high narrow proportions of their doors and windows are another note of distinction drawn from the eighteenth century tradition.⁴

Bottomley correctly identifies the underlying influence of 18th century architectural design in the firm's commissions. Delano and Aldrich freely borrowed inspiration not only from American 18th century architecture but also from that of French and English. At first glance their designs may appear to fit quite simply into the American Colonial Revival form but they are in reality original and complexly subtle distillations from the general 18th century tradition. Because the architects, through their training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, understood the underlying principles of the age, they could draw motifs from a wide range of sources into a unified and perfectly balanced whole.

A close examination of the Knickerbocker Club Building, one of Delano & Aldrich's most carefully executed New York designs, helps to explain the success of their work. The overriding inspiration of the club's design is clearly the American Federal period. This building with its clear, sharp rectangular theme is reminiscent of Samuel McIntire's Pingree House (1805) in Salem, Massachusetts. Similarities between the two buildings include: the horizontal rectangular massing, the division into three main stories, the reduction of the attic fenestration, the modillion cornice, the roof balustrade and the restraint of ornamentation. Like much of the Federal architecture of McIntire and Charles Bulfinch, the coherency of the Knickerbocker Club Building is largely determined by the manipulation of the rectangular units. Against the horizontal orientation of the mass, which is emphasized by the limestone base, belt course, balconies, lintels and cornice, are balanced the vertical rectangles of the tall windows and their elongated panes. Like Bulfinch, the firm borrowed the use of iron balconies from English townhouses of the Neoclassical era.⁵ As in the earlier work the balconies of the Knickerbocker Club Building serve to emphasize the location of the principle rooms. Here the adaptation of American Federal era motifs stops. From their perspective in the 20th century, Delano & Aldrich felt free to introduce into their designs other 18th century design features which were quite foreign to the Federal tradition. In particular their great respect for French 18th century architecture encouraged them to elaborate on the simpler American theme. The restrained but classically baroque doorway with its broken segmental arch pediment and round arch bay makes no concession to the attenuated mannerisms of the Adam style, the traditional influence on Federal era designers. A far more unorthodox but equally successful motif is found in the balcony above the doorway. Here in contrast to the rectangular theme of most of the building's units we find a curvilinear shelf which breaks the continuity of the horizontal members on either side. This curvilinear motif which is echoed in the iron balcony above, is a brilliant interjection from 18th century French rococo work. During the first half of this century, Delano & Aldrich gradually usurped the monopoly on New York club design from McKim, Mead & White. While their later clubs such as the Colony Club (1924) and the Union Club (1932) stand out as imposing structures of considerable size, the early commission for the Knickerbocker Club is more reflective of the restrained elegance of their residential design. In particular there is a similarity of spirit between the design of the Knickerbocker Club Building and that of the William D. Straight House (1913-1915), a designated New York City Landmark at 1130 Fifth Avenue. These two buildings established the high standard of excellence for neo-Federal design in New York City.

Oriented towards the lower scaled residential neighborhood along 62nd Street the three-story Knickerbocker Club Building is a superb example of the neo-Federal style. Raised up on a rusticated limestone base and skirted by a limestone belt course at the second story level, the finely colored brick walls are laid in a carefully executed English bond and are finished by a limestone modillion cornice and balustrade at the roofline. The well proportioned seven-bay facade is characterized by a classical door surround set into a round arch bay. The limestone doorway which incorporates Tuscan columns is surmounted by a broken segmental arch pediment. The bilateral symmetry of the front is again emphasized at the second story level where the central bay is capped by a limestone hood molding supported by consoles and sheltering an Adamesque frieze. The tautly drawn facade is pierced at the first and second story levels by elegant six-over-six sash windows patterned with slender mullions. Above the windows are set limestone lintels which on the first floor are decorated with rosettes in the corner blocks. A diminution of the fenestration at the third story level hints of the early Federal style. The crisp cubic mass of the club is delicately laced with a series of wrought iron window grilles and balconies which were supplied by the Wells Architectural Iron Works. The Adamesque balconies at the second story level suggest the existence of the club's main rooms on the piano nobile. The Fifth Avenue elevation includes four bays of the club's main block and one bay of the eastern wing which appears recessed behind the enclosed patio.

As the new clubhouse neared completion, the contemporary press lauded it as "one of the most attractive of the newer buildings on Fifth Avenue."⁶ The article further noted that "there is a simplicity combined with rich dignity about the building which strikes the observer more forcibly than the more ornate exteriors of many Fifth Avenue homes. It is expressive of the conservatism, if not the exclusiveness of the club. The style is distinctly Colonial, that is, Knickerbocker, thoroughly in keeping with the name, which is well worthy of being recalled at times in this cosmopolitan age."⁷ Today the simplicity and dignity of the Knickerbocker Club Building are even more appreciated. The building with its attention to fine craftsmanship and its strong reference to the architecture of the Federal era stands as a continuing reminder of the highest quality of New York City architecture.

Report prepared by
Ruth Selden-Sturgill, Research
Department

Typed by Loretta Burnett

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 Knickerbocker Club 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 Knickerbocker Club Building is one of the city's finest examples of the neo-Federal style; that the success of the building's design can be attributed to the architect's unique synthesis of French Beaux-Arts principles and colonial precedent; that the high quality of the facade's composition is largely determined by a sophisticated manipulation of rectangular units which are complimented by 18th century decorative elements; that among the facades' notable characteristics are its clear rectangular massing, carefully-proportioned windows, delicate wrought iron balconies and restrained limestone trim; that it was designed in 1913-1915 by the fashionable architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich to be the third home of this exclusive men's club; that the building was sensitively planned to fit comfortably into the residential neighborhood along 62nd Street as well as to maintain the club's traditional presence on Fifth Avenue; and that the Knickerbocker Club Building with its attention to fine craftsmanship and its strong reference to the Federal era stands as a continuing reminder of the highest quality of New York City architecture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Knickerbocker Club Building Borough of Manhattan and designation Tas Map Block 1376, Lot 69, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

FOOTNOTES

1. William J. Dunn, Knickerbocker Centennial: An Informal History of the Knickerbocker Club, 1871-1971 (New York: Knickerbocker Club, 1979), p. 19 footnote.
2. New York Times, June 14, 1913, p. 6 C. 6.
3. New York Herald Tribune, January 13, 1960, Artists Clipping File, New York Public Library.
4. W.L. Bottomley, "A Selection from the Works of Delano & Aldrich", Architectural Record, 54 (1923), p. 4.
5. William H. Pierson, Jr., American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 264 .
6. Dunn, p. 96.
7. Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bottomley, W.L. "A Selection from the Works of Delano & Aldrich," Architectural Record, 54 (1923), pp 3-71.
- Drexler, Arthur, ed. The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977.
- Dunn, William J. Knickerbocker Centennial: An Informal History of the Knickerbocker Club, 1871-1971. New York: Knickerbocker Club, 1971.
- Fairfield, Francis Gerry. The Clubs of New York. New York: H.L. Hinton, 1873.
- Great American Architects' Series; Nos. 1-6; May 1895 - July 1899: The Architectural Record Co. New York: Da Cupo, 1977.
- James, Jr., Theodore. Fifth Avenue. New York: Walker and Company, 1971.
- King, Moses. King's Handbook of New York City. Boston: Moses King, 1893.
- Maas, John. The Glorious Enterprise. Watkins Glen, N.Y.: American Life Foundation, 1973.
- "Memoirs of Centurian Architects" Journal of the American Institute of Architects, 9 (1948), pp. 3-8; 81-88; 130-136; 180-184.
- A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915. Essay by Leland Roth. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1973.
- The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography. New York: James T. White & Co., 1929.
- New York City Building Department Records.
- New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Files.
- New York Public Library. Artist's Clipping File.
- New York Times, February 4, 1912, p. 14 c.4; June 14, 1913, p. 6 c.6; February 8, 1914, p. 8 c.2; June 12, 1915, p. 7 c.7; January 13, 1960, p. 48 c.1; April 22, 1961, p. 25 c.4.
- Pierson, Jr., William H. American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970.
- Rhoads, William B. The Colonial Revival. New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1977.
- Scully, Jr., Vincent J. The Shingle Style and The Stick Style. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.
- Stokes, I.N. Phelps. Iconography of Manhattan Island, Vol.5. New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1926.
- "Talk of the Town," The New Yorker, April 5, 1958, pp. 23-24.
- Withey, Henry F., and Withey, Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970.



Photo Credit:
Gottscho-Schleisher

Knickerbocker Club
Built 1913-15

Architects:
Delano & Aldrich