

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 23, 1982 Designation List 153
LP-1100

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS BUILDING, 597 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1912-13; architect Ernest Flagg.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1284, Lot 2.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Charles Scribner's Sons Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing was continued to January 8, 1980 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were four speakers in opposition to designation.

Description and Analysis

The Scribner Building, built in 1912-13, is an elegant ~~Beaux-Arts~~ commercial structure by the eminent American architect Ernest Flagg. This was the second building Flagg designed for the prominent publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons and incorporated many of the same design features of the earlier work, expanding and elaborating them for this new, more fashionable midtown location at Fifth Avenue near 48th Street.

The firm of Charles Scribner's Sons has been and remains today one of the leading publishing houses in this country. It came into existence with the partnership of Charles Scribner and Isaac Baker in 1846. The original quarters of the firm were at the former building of the Old Brick Church on Park Row and Nassau Street, a book trade headquarters at the time. A book entitled The Puritans and Their Principles by Edwin Hall was the first work published by the company. Reflecting Scribner's devout Presbyterian background, the firm of Scribner and Baker soon distinguished itself as a leading publisher of books on theological and philosophical subjects. Financial success was assured by such early best sellers as J.T. Headley's Napoleon and his Marshals and Washington and his Generals (both 1847) and Nathaniel P. Willis' People I Have Met (1850). Baker died in 1850 and Scribner continued the business alone, as Charles Scribner and Company. In 1857 he purchased Bangs, Merwin & Co. a British book importing business, and took on Charles Welford as a partner, organizing the firm of Scribner and Welford, importers. He also started a subscriptions department, which published the first American edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1865 he expanded into magazine publishing with the first issue of Hours at Home, later

Scribner's Monthly. At the time of his death in 1871 in Switzerland, The New York Times commented:

As a publisher Mr. Scribner was noted for the sagacity, accurancy, quickness and soundness of his judgements. The breadth, liberality and catholicity of his views, as well as the ripeness of his views, were admirably represented by the character and high standing of the publications that he issued... of Mr. Scribner as a man it is almost impossible to speak in terms that shall not seem exaggerated to all but those who had the privilege of his personal acquaintance.¹

At Scribner's death, the firms' names were changed to Scribner, Armstrong & Co., publishers, and Scribner, Armstrong & Welford, book importers. Scribner's sons, John Blair Scribner, and, after his graduation from Princeton in 1875, Charles Scribner II, began to regain control of the companies from the various partners their father had admitted over the years. In 1878 the brothers changed the name of the publishing house to Charles Scribner's Sons, which it retains today. Upon the death of Welford in 1885, the importing end of the business was discontinued. In 1881 Scribner's Monthly was sold to the Century Company, and Scribner's agreed to stay out of the magazine business for at least five years. Thus it was not until 1887 that a new periodical, Scribner's Magazine, was launched. Charles Scribner II soon distinguished himself as a leader of the movement for copyright laws in the United States and as a founder of the American Publisher's Association. He also helped to organize the Princeton University Press in 1905. Among the many publications issued under his leadership were the American editions of Baedeker's Guides, the Dictionary of American Biography, as well as works of such distinguished authors as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Brander Matthews, and George Santayana,⁴ and British authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, George Meredith, and Rudyard Kipling.²

After occupying several offices in lower Manhattan, in 1893 the company decided to move uptown and bought land at 155 Fifth Avenue. Charles Scribner's brother-in-law, Ernest Flagg, was commissioned to prepare the plans for the new building. This was a six-story, limestone-faced structure with a large bookstore occupying the street floor. Twenty years later, when Scribner's followed the commercial movement northward to midtown Manhattan, Flagg was again asked to design their new headquarters at 597 Fifth Avenue.

Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) was a prominent and talented American practitioner of French Beaux Arts design principles. His long and varied career produced fine institutional buildings such as St. Luke's Hospital (1891) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1891); commercial structures such as the Singer Tower (1906-08, demolished), a smaller Singer Building at Broadway and Prince Street (1904) in the Soho-Cast Iron Historic District, and the Produce Exchange Bank (1905, demolished); elegant townhouses such as those he designed for Charles Scribner II at 9 East 66th Street and for Oliver G. Jennings (1898) at 7 East 72nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark; firehouses such as that for Engine Company No. 33 on Great Jones Street (1898), a designated New York City Landmark, and that for Engine Company No. 67 on 170th Street. He is also known for the design of the ten original buildings of the campus of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis (1899-1907).

Flagg displayed his concern for social and planning issues through his writings as well as through his designs. Despite the fact that the Singer Tower was the tallest building in the world when it was constructed, in his article "The Limitation of Height and Area of Buildings in New York" Flagg argued in favor of zoning laws which would regulate the height and setback of buildings to allow light and air to reach the streets below them.³ The Mills Hotels for working men which he designed, showed that decent, fireproof housing could be provided at low cost. Other endeavors of this type were the model tenements he designed for the City and Suburban Homes Company between 68th and 69th Streets near Amsterdam Avenue and for the New York Fireproof Association between 41st and 42nd Streets on Tenth Avenue. (Both were built before 1902.) In his book Small Houses: Their Economic Design and Construction (1922) Flagg detailed a system of modular construction with concrete, in order to reduce the costs of building.

Indications of Flagg's superb sense of design and innovative ideas were evident early in his career. After floundering through a series of unsuccessful business ventures, he joined with architect Philip G. Hubert in the advance sale and construction of cooperative apartment buildings. Flagg's first attempt at planning was for one of these buildings, the Knickerbocker, which stood at Fifth Avenue and 28th Street. He devised a system of duplex apartments for this building which was most unusual at the time.

Flagg's cousin Cornelius Vanderbilt was so impressed with Flagg's planning ideas that he sponsored the young man's study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. There Ernest Flagg worked in the atelier of Paul Blondel and absorbed the principles of logical planning and formal design which the school stressed. These principles included the idea of a "parti" or general conception of the building, how it

would most logically meet all its requirements and constraints and the way all the various parts of the structure would fit together. According to Flagg, for an architect trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, the solution to all these problems would be most clearly expressed in a plan based on logic. The design of the exterior would then grow naturally out of this plan and be closely linked to it. Further, Flagg wrote that architectural principles were learned from the human form: "symmetry from right to left and diversity from head to foot."⁴

Flagg applied these principles to the buildings he designed on his return to the United States in 1891. His first commission at that time was for St. Luke's Hospital on West 113th Street in New York City. It had a large domed, central tower surrounded by separate pavilions connected by corridors to one another. The plan called for each section to be well-ventilated with fresh air and able to be closed off in order to prevent the spread of contagious diseases.

In 1897 Flagg designed his first building for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, at Broadway and Liberty Street. Later (1904-05), he designed the Bourne Building adjacent to this. Both of these structures were remodelled and incorporated into the forty-seven story Singer Tower in 1906-08. This skyscraper was composed of a thin elegant tower crowned by an elaborate mansard roof and lantern, which grew out of a solid, low block with its own curved mansard roof and limestone trim. Two continuous limestone piers gave a vertical emphasis to each facade of the tower and contrasted sharply with the plain dark brick at each corner. These piers flanked central groups of iron-framed windows as they rose through the height of the tower. This design resulted directly from the structural requirements of the building. The height of the tower required innovations in the area of wind bracing, which took the form of five huge piers (each with its own truss system) to carry the weight of the building. These piers were located at each corner and at the elevator shaft. Small windows were pierced through each pier to light the corner rooms but most of the windows were grouped together toward the center of each facade, in the openings between the piers.⁵

In Flagg's 1904 building for Singer on Broadway and Prince Street, as well as in the 1905 Produce Exchange Bank, a feeling of lightness was dominant on the facades, as large expanses of glass gave a full expression to the steel frame of each building. Certain design themes seen in these and earlier buildings were also used in later works by Flagg, but always in original and appropriate combinations. These include windows grouped vertically through the use of metal spandrels below them and continuous piers along each side. An elliptical arch with spiral ornament in its spandrels is found twice on the 1904 Singer Building in a manner very similar to the way it would be used on the second Scribner Building. The composition of this

Singer Building is also very similar to that of the Scribner. A central group of windows has a single bay on either side incorporating windows of a simpler shape and smaller size.

As can be seen, the building designed in 1912 for Charles Scribner's Sons incorporated Flagg's diverse architectural experiences. Primarily however, it was based on the first Scribner Building, built twenty years before. The basic themes and rhythms are the same, expanded and elaborated for this larger work. The obvious success of the first design resulted in features which were carried over into the later work. While the first Scribner Building was only six stories high, it incorporated the usual division of the facade into a base, mid-section and top. The first two stories formed the base of the composition, set off from the rest of the facade by the rusticated stonework of the second floor and the stone balustrade above it. The mid-section was treated as a single element in both buildings although it was only two stories in the first building and four stories in the later work. The central three bays were linked by continuous piers while their dark iron enframements and spandrels made the windows appear to be recessed. The single windows in each side bay were treated very plainly and kept close to the front plane of the building. A transitional story separated this section from the mansard roof with large central dormer which capped both buildings.

The most striking similarity between the two buildings is on the first floor where the main Scribner bookstore was intended to be located. The bookstore is distinguished from the rest of the building by its materials: the entrance and display windows are framed in black ironwork. A shallow elliptical arch crowns this area in both buildings, with delicate scrollwork in the spandrels. In the first building Flagg had been somewhat restrained about this design, limiting this section to the three central bays while giving more distinction to the two separate doors on each side which lead to the upper office floors.

Following Flagg's interpretation of the Beaux Arts dictum, the second Scribner building is also symmetrical from side to side. Five bays wide, the three central bays form a group distinct from and more elaborately decorated than the two end bays. The glass and iron of the two lower floors indicate the special use of this area as a bookstore and serve as a strong focal point for the facade. Above this the main section of the building - seven floors - is faced with limestone. The third and ninth floors serve as visual transitions distinguishing the central section from the base and the two-story mansard roof. A pleasing balance of solid and void is created through the juxtaposition of areas of dark iron work and light stone work. This adds a sense of lightness to an otherwise substantial eleven-story building.

The entrance to the bookstore is in the center of the two-story glass and iron area which extends for the entire width of the building. A set of double doors is topped by a broken pediment filled with the Scribner's logo. Plate glass windows flank the doorway providing a display area and an intriguing view of the double-height bookstore within. A secondary entrance in the right bay leads to the offices in the upper floors of the building. The Scribner company presently occupies all but two of the office floors.

A pair of slender, fluted columns separates the end from the central section. Roundels fill the second floor of the side bays while half of an elliptical arch is delineated in the central area. The expanses of glass are broken up into small panes while the spandrels of the arch and the circles are filled with delicate, spiral ornament which could be a modification of the initials "C" and "S". Brass trim highlights the dark ironwork. The iron and glass bookstore with elliptical arch and colonettes were all features of the original Scribner building.

Directly above the elliptical arch, two putti hold a garland around a cartouche inscribed "Charles Scribner's Sons." A similar emblem can still be seen on the building at 153-157 Fifth Avenue, although the name has been obliterated.

The floor above this is extremely simple, with rusticated limestone surrounding unadorned casement windows. Large console brackets decorated with lions' heads support the stone balcony of the floor above and extend down well into this level.

The fourth story is highly ornamented. In addition to the elaborately carved, stone balcony which extends across the three central bays, the piers between these same windows contain carved panels. Each panel exhibits a medallion with the bust of a great printer: Benjamin Franklin, William Caxton, Johann Gutenberg, Aldus Manutius. The windows of the side bays of this floor are surmounted by pediments carried on console brackets.

The next three stories are grouped together by their similar treatment and by the continuous piers which link the three central bays. As in the original Scribner building, these central windows seem to recede because of their dark iron framework and spandrels. Each of the spandrels contains a central cartouche surrounded by delicate curvilinear motifs. This central section of the three stories is crowned by a simple entablature with a modified fret design on the frieze. The central windows on the floor above this are treated in a very similar manner except that they are topped with segmental arches and the iron work takes the form of railings instead of spandrels. The windows of the side bays on all four floors are small and edged only with a simple molding. Guttæ support the sills of these windows.

Another transitional floor finishes this central section of the building. A simple entablature with a shallow pellet-molding frieze sets off this ninth floor. It is decorated by embellished torches below it, one located at the top of each pier. The window rhythm of this floor is an almost exact copy of the transitional fifth floor of the first Scribner Building. Broad pilasters separate each of the five windows and flank the outer ones as well. The pilasters between the three central bays are fluted and each of these windows is further divided by two colonettes to form a tripartite composition.

A heavy, protruding entablature, carried on closely spaced console brackets provides a distinctive finish to the main body of the building. This entablature supports a simple parapet which is broken in the middle by an elaborately decorated, two-story dormer. Solemn caryatids on each side of the dormer support a broken pediment which is filled with a lion's head and a cartouche. The dormer itself is linked to the parapet by a heavy console bracket on each side. Each outside corner of the parapet is surmounted by a simple obelisk-shaped pinnacle. The parapet shields a simple, two-story mansard roof. On each side of the central dormer two plain, double-hung windows break through the mansard to provide light to the top floor. These windows and the top of the mansard are edged in copper.

The Scribner Building is a major example of Ernest Flagg's commercial work still extant in New York. Its well-balanced composition and delicate ornament contribute elegance and sophistication to its mid-Fifth Avenue location. The existence and continued use of this building is a tribute to the sensibility and concern of the Scribner Company and it is an appropriate corporate symbol for this important and respected publishing house.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The New York Times, 28 August, 1871, p. 4.
2. Information on the history of the Scribner firm was taken from the designation report on the first Scribner Building (LP-0935) of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.
3. Published in American Architect and Building News, Vol. 93 (April 15, 1908), pp. 125-129.
4. Ernest Flagg, "The Ecole des Beaux Arts," The Architectural Record, Vol. 4 (1894), p. 39.
5. "The Singer Building," Architects' and Builders' Magazine, Vol. 9, no. 10 (July, 1908), pp. 429-30.
6. John Taurenac, Essential New York (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), pp. 136-37.

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 Charles Scribner's Sons 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 Scribner Building is an outstanding Beaux-Arts commercial structure; that it was designed in 1912 by the eminent, French-trained architect Ernest Flagg; that it represents the culmination of the design and planning ideas Flagg developed on earlier buildings; that the flamboyant ironwork which frames the first floor exemplifies some of the best design and craftsmanship of the early 20th century; that the building has one of the only remaining ornamental storefronts in Manhattan; and that this elegant and distinctive building is an appropriate corporate symbol for the publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons with its long and distinguished history.

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 Charles Scribner's Sons Building, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1284, Lot 2, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Landmarks Preservation Commission

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS BUILDING
597 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan

Built 1912-13; architect Ernest Flagg



Photo: Landmarks Preservation Commission

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS BUILDING, Storefront detail