

Landmarks Preservation Commission
August 11, 1981, Designation List 146
LP-1160

54 West 130th STREET HOUSE, (Part of Astor Row), Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1883.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1727, Lot 64.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 54 West 130th Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 32). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Two letters were received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The group of buildings known as Astor Row is comprised of 28 houses, (Nos. 8-62), effectively grouped in pairs, extending along most of the south side of 130th Street between Fifth Avenue and Lenox Avenue. They were built as a speculative development in the 1830s at a time when William Astor owned this land. Their architectural details are unusual for their place and time and their coherent style sets them apart from other remaining 19th-century rowhouses in the Harlem area. As a group, they create a pleasant streetfront, recalling a period when Harlem was changing from a country town to an urbanized area.

History and Development

Harlem, originally called Nieuw Harlem, derives its name from the Dutch city of Haarlem. The village was established by Peter Stuyvesant in 1658, and embraced generally the northern area of Manhattan, above Central Park. From the colonial period, through the 18th century, the region retained its rural cast, supporting farms and the estates of some of New York's most illustrious early families, including the Delanceys, Deekmans, Bleekers, Rikers and Hamiltons.

Harlem suffered a decline in the 1830s when its lush farmland was depleted and many great estates were sold at public auction. The area was sought by those desiring cheap property and housing, including many newly-arrived and destitute immigrants who gathered in scattered shantytowns. However, most of the scenic topography was left untouched and the striking vistas and unspoiled country attracted fashionable downtowners on picnics and daytrips, particularly after the 1860s.

It was the advent of new and better forms of transportation, as well as the increasing population of New York which brought about the change in Harlem from a rural village to a fashionable upper and upper-middle-class neighborhood. The New York & Harlem railroad had run trains from lower Manhattan to Harlem, starting in 1837, but service was poor and the trip long. As the population of New York swelled in the 1870s residential development continued in a northerly direction. Harlem was annexed to New York in 1873, and by 1881 three lines of the elevated railroad reached as far north as 129th Street, precipitating the development of new neighborhoods.

Practically all the houses that stand in Harlem today were built in the period beginning in the 1870s through the first decade of the 20th century. Exclusive homes such as those on Striver's Row in the St. Nicholas Historic District, helped establish Harlem as a center of fashion and elegance. The area also boasted rows of more modest brownstones, the popular Polo Grounds, and the distinguished Harlem Opera House. Some speculators made tremendous profits by buying and re-selling land.

Prices increased so dramatically that one old-timer complained in 1889, "When I see the prices real estate is now bringing in Harlem, it makes me feel that I was a fool for not making... investments years ago when property was so cheap."²

One more canny investor was John Jacob Astor. Adhering to his own principles of buying land in outlying areas of New York on the certain conviction that the city would eventually grow to meet them, he had purchased a number of lots in Harlem at an auction in 1844. Astor's creed was to pay less than premium price because the land was uninhabited or farmland. He was content to hold onto his lots for long periods, allowing them to remain empty until someone came along who was interested in improving them.

The block of West 130th Street between Fifth and Lenox Avenues was purchased by Astor in 1844 for \$10,000. Previously it had been owned by Charles Henry Hall who had purchased it in 1825 as part of a larger parcel of Harlem land. During the 19th century it had been a part of two different farms, those of John Sickles and John Adriance. When Astor died in 1848, the block passed with the rest of his estate to his son William Backhouse Astor. William B. Astor's holdings were in turn bequeathed in 1875 to his sons John Jacob Astor III and William Astor. These two created a partition agreement in 1878, dividing the inherited real estate between themselves. On this block in Harlem, John Jacob Astor III received the southern half of the block which faces 129th Street (lots 1-36), while William Astor held title to the northern half, facing 130th Street (lots 37-72). Astor Row was constructed on part of this latter section in the early 1880s, during the tremendous Harlem building boom. In 1893, as part of William Astor's will, the houses were divided among his grandchildren, Mary, James and Sarah Van Alen. They maintained ownership until the second and third decade of the 20th century. During their ownership these were single-family dwellings, housing middle-and upper-middle-class whites, "people of taste and wealth"³ from downtown Manhattan. In 1920, the houses were described by a New York Times reporter "as one of the most attractive and exclusive home centres" in Harlem, presenting "a picture of domestic tranquility and comfort which few other... blocks in the city possess."⁴

However, the character of Harlem changed considerably during the early years of the 20th century. Proposed subway routes to West Harlem in the late 1890s had sparked another wave of real estate speculation which led to highly inflated market values. Tremendous numbers of new residential buildings were constructed around the turn of the century. Extensive vacancies and artificially high rents led to a general collapse of the real estate market in 1904-05 as loans were withheld and mortgages foreclosed.

Taking advantage of the deflated market and the housing surplus which followed, a black businessman named Philip Payton and his Afro-American Realty Company, founded in 1904, played a major role in the development of Harlem as a black community. In the aftermath of the real estate collapse, Payton acquired five-year leases on white-owned properties and rented them at higher rates to black families.

Blacks who could afford high rents had begun moving to Harlem at the turn of the century. A dramatic increase in Harlem's black population came, however, as hundreds of black families were uprooted when their homes in the Tenderloin area near 34th Street were destroyed during the 1906-1910 construction of Pennsylvania Station. For the first time good housing in large quantities was available to New York's blacks. Just as Harlem had been an exclusive white community, it became an exclusive black community, with more than 50,000 blacks living there by 1914.² Despite the increase in black residents, Negro ownership of Harlem property remained limited until 1914. After 1914 there was a significant increase in the amount of black capital invested in the area.

Sarah Van Alen was the first of the Astor Row land holders to sell, divesting herself of Nos. 42-62 (lots 59-63) in 1912. The rest of Astor Row was held by Mary and James Van Alen until 1920 and 1921, respectively. An all-white enclave until that point, Astor Row was described in Claude McKay's novel, Home to Harlem (New York, 1928) as "the block beautiful."

By the time these lots were sold, Harlem was predominately populated by Negroes. During the next ten years, Harlem changed from a promising black community to a deplorable slum. A tremendous need for housing due to the influx of blacks from the South and from the West Indies, as well as exorbitant rents for the living spaces that existed led to the subdivision of houses like those on Astor Row. Although built for single families, within a short time they were carved up into boarding houses and single-room-occupancy dwellings. Their ownership changed often during these years, as did the tenants and the modifications to the interiors. These buildings on Astor Row provide an excellent study in the development and change of the community of Harlem. Today, most of these buildings remain divided into single room or small apartments. The only exception is No. 62 which is owned by and serves the Pentecostal Faith Church.

The Architecture of Astor Row

The 28 buildings of Astor Row were constructed in three groups. Nos. 8-22 were built first, in 1880-81; the architect was Charles Buek. The second group of houses, Nos. 24-38, was built in 1882-83, while the final section, Nos. 40-62, was erected later in 1883. The design of the last twenty houses, created without benefit of an architect, was almost identical to that of the first group. Except for slight changes in the decorative motifs, the main difference between them is that the first group of buildings was constructed in freestanding pairs, each pair separate from its neighbors. The remaining houses were built as a continuous row, although a deep recess between each pair of houses carries through the same effect as is found on the first buildings. The houses are set back from the street behind small front yards.

Whether or not the Astor Row houses were built under the direction of William Astor remains a question. The usual Astor policy

with regard to real estate was to grant a lease on a certain parcel for a long term, usually 21 years. The lessor would then be expected to make improvements to the land, such as erecting buildings, and would also be responsible for maintaining the buildings. At the onset of a new lease, Astor could then raise the rent because the land contained improvements and was thus more valuable. Whether or not this happened on Astor Row and a lessor was responsible for hiring Charles Buek and erecting these houses has been impossible to determine. The most that can be stated with certainty is that the buildings were erected during the time the land was owned by William Astor.

The architect of the first eight houses, Charles Buek, was known primarily for the large, elaborate private homes and apartments he designed for wealthy clients. He started his career in the firm of Duggin & Crossman in 1870. When this firm dissolved, Buek established his own office as Charles Buek & Co., with Charles Duggin as special partner. Much of their work centered around the east side of Manhattan, on Lexington and Madison Avenues, from the 30's to the 70's. Later they produced some buildings in the West 72nd Street area. Buek's clients included George Moor, Charles Dana, Charles M. Fry and John A. Stewart.

Two of Buek's house designs were published in the magazine American Architect & Building News. These designs included an 1892 group of brick and stone buildings with Queen Anne details on Riverside Drive and a 1901 row house which reflected the increasingly popular neo-Classical style. The latter was a dignified five-story structure on East 49th Street with light stone trim and ornament which enlivened the subdued brick front. Other buildings by Buek are still extant on and near Madison Avenue in the 60's and 70's. The styles of these buildings vary widely although they often combine brick facades with stone trim and classically-inspired details.

The style Buek chose to employ on the Astor Row houses was not only quite different from other structures in his oeuvre, but was unusual for most row houses built during this period. By contrast, the houses on the north side of 130th Street, built during the 1870's which are not a Buek design and are not associated with the Astor family, are more typical: high stoops, stone facades and more elaborate Italianate details. The simple brick facades of Astor Row, with their wide front porches and small, neat yards were much more suggestive of the rural background of Harlem than of the urban area it was becoming. A few houses with broad wooden porches remained scattered throughout the area into the early years of the 20th century, remnants of a much earlier period. The arrangement of the Astor Row houses in pairs, with recesses between them, is also quite unusual.

The neo-Grec details found on these buildings typified by the simple, linear incised designs in the lintels were commonly found on commercial cast-iron buildings. Examples of these types of motifs are found on the Roosevelt Building at 478-482 Broadway, designed in 1874 by Richard Morris Hunt. The original B. Altman store at 19th Street and Sixth Avenue, designed by David and John Jardine in 1876 contains some elements which are similar to those found on the Astor houses. A small pendant triangle droops down from the horizontal line of the lintel with a light and dainty incised motif centered above it.

Brownstone rowhouses and apartment buildings with this type of neo-Grec ornament were being constructed on the Upper East Side of Manhattan during the 1870s. A few years later, in the 1880s, the neo-Grec style had reached the row houses of Brooklyn, particularly Cobble Hill, Park Slope and Bedford-Stuyvesant where buildings with this type of ornament are numerous. These houses were often composed of brick facades with light colored stone sills and lintels. Band courses linked the doorways and windows and linear, foliate designs were incised in areas over the doors and windows.

Near Park Avenue, at 57-65 East 129th Street is a group of five row houses which bear a striking similarity to Astor Row. John Jacob Astor purchased these lots at the same time he bought the land on 130th Street, and they have a similar developmental history. While these buildings on 129th Street were not constructed until 1889, their design is clearly based on that of the 130th Street houses. They vary from the earlier houses in that they were built as a continuous row, with no breaks in the building line and they have high stoops, with raised front porches. In other respects they are extremely similar, including their brick facades with squared, shouldered stone lintels, protruding brick band courses at the sill lines and a three-dimensional brick frieze with a recessed quatrefoil motif at the center. The similarities in design seem to indicate the success of the earlier buildings on Astor Row.

The Astor Row buildings are all three stories high and are constructed of brick with light stone trim. Each pair is symmetrical, the center being indicated by a projecting brick pier topped by a stone triglyph at the cornice line. Each individual house is two bays wide, with a double door and a full height window on the first floor. Two double-hung windows are located on each floor above this one. Each window is surmounted by a broad, shouldered stone lintel with a delicate incised design centered in it. The mid-point of the lintel is emphasized by a small triangular extension which points down in front of the window molding. A simple, projecting string course wraps around the building at each sill line with footed sills located just below these courses.

A complete entablature crowns the front of these houses. It is composed of a simple projecting stone architrave surmounted by a brick frieze comprised of recessed quatrefoil motifs. A cornice with brick dentils finishes the roofline.

Originally each house had a large wooden porch running the full width of the building. Many porches are still in place although some have been changed or removed. The porches are covered by shallow roofs supported on thin wooden columns at each corner. The upper part of each column is squared and is distinguished by bands and decorative bosses as well as by paint of contrasting color. Decorative brackets join these columns to the roof. Just below the roof is a continuous row of thin wooden spindles. The effect of the spindles and the decorative wood trim is reminiscent of the Eastlake style of decoration, popular in this country in the 1870s and 1880s. A plain railing with straight wooden slats surrounds the porch at the floor level.

The house at No. 54 West 130th Street has double glass-paneled doors which replaced the original doors. The porch with all its decorative elements is in place; however, the fence which surrounds the yard is a modern one.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 75.
2. Quoted in Osofsky, p. 76.
3. Osofsky, p. 79.
4. New York Times, Nov. 21, 1920. Quoted in Osofsky, p. 76.
5. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Metropolitan Baptist Church Designation Report (LP-1134) by Rachel Carley, February, 1981, p.3.

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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 54 West 130th Street House 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 house at 54 West 130th Street is a vital component of the unique group of buildings known as Astor Row; that it displays such unusual architectural features as its broad, wooden front porch with Eastlake elements, its neo-Grec details in stone on a brick facade and its arrangement as one of a pair with its neighbor; that the row of buildings of which No. 54 forms an integral part is representative of the vast numbers of buildings constructed on speculation during the tremendous Harlem building boom of the late 19th century; that the history of these houses parallels the development and history of the Harlem area; that the Astor Row houses, with their wide porches, neat lawns and low profiles create a pleasant streetscape recalling Harlem's shift from a country town to an urban section of New York; and that the houses continue to accommodate members of the Harlem community.

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 54 West 130th Street House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1727, Lot 64, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



Astor Row Houses
52-54 West 130th Street
Manhattan

Photo Andrew S. Dolkart