

WEIR GREENHOUSE (now McGovern-Weir Greenhouse), southwest corner Fifth Avenue and 25th Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built; 1895, architect G. Curtis Gillespie.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn. Tax Map Block 655, Lot 31.

On July 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Weir Greenhouse (now McGovern-Weir Greenhouse) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 24). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner has expressed support for this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Weir Greenhouse is among the rarest of nineteenth-century survivors; it is the only Victorian commercial greenhouse known to be extant in New York City. Greenhouses are among the most fragile of building types and without constant maintenance they will quickly decay. The Weir Greenhouse has been in continuous use for almost a century, serving visitors to Greenwood Cemetery; lovingly cared for, it continues to grace the approach to this historic cemetery.

The Greenhouse - A Brief History¹

The nurturing of plants in artificially created environments may date back to the "gardens of Adonis" in fifth-century (B.C.) Greece. Buildings for the cultivation of plants are definitely known to have been in use by the first century A.D. and are described by Roman naturalists, but it was not until the Renaissance that a methodical study of plants, and an increase in international trade and commerce, brought about the widespread development of the greenhouse. The sixteenth century had seen a renewed interest among scientists and amateurs in botany. This led in 1543 to the opening of the first botanical garden in Pisa. Botanical gardens in Florence, Padua, Bologna, and Leyden soon followed, and by the end of the century those in Padua and Leyden had primitive heated sheds built to protect tropical plants from the harsh European winter. The interest in plants, particularly in such commercial centers as England, Holland, and Venice, was directly linked to the growth in international trade and exploration. Sir Walter Raleigh and other explorers brought back exotic plants and seeds (Raleigh introduced the orange to England) that had to be artificially nurtured in Europe's uninviting environment.

By the seventeenth century, books of practical advice on greenhouse gardening were being written for an aristocracy which had become interested in greenhouses because they insured a steady supply of exotic fruits, particularly citrus fruits. Many of the plant houses built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were very large; the orangery of the Elector Palantine in Heidelberg was 280 feet long. Most of these early hot houses did not have extensive areas of glass, but by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries glass houses had appeared in Dutch gardens, particularly at Leyden. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Dutch were building greenhouses with sloping glass frames, in which they cultivated oranges, pineapples, and grapes. Such glass houses absorbed and retained heat which was supplemented by boilers set below the greenhouse floor.

Horticulture was greatly advanced in the early nineteenth century with the research and writings of John C. Loudon who designed a number of innovative greenhouses. The nineteenth century saw the perfection of the greenhouse as an environment suitable for the growth of exotic plants. It was during the nineteenth century that most of the great private and public greenhouses were built, including the Chatsworth Conservatory (1836, demolished), the Chatsworth Glass Wall (1848), Dublin's Botanic Garden Conservatory (1842), the Palm House at Kew (1845-48), King Leopold II's Laeken Palace, Brussels (1865-1894), the Lyndhurst Greenhouse, Tarrytown, New York (c.1870), and New York City's greatest greenhouse, The Enid A. Haupt Conservatory (1899-1900) at the New York Botanical Gardens. This was also the age of the great glass exhibition palaces, such as the monumental London Crystal Palace (1850) and the New York Crystal Palace (1852), built with the same technology as the plant houses.

In 1858 Joseph Paxton, designer of the Chatsworth Glass Wall and the Crystal Palace, patented a type of prefabricated wood and glass greenhouse which would be suitable for the gardens of middle-class suburban residences, and in the next decade many British companies began to manufacture prefabricated glass houses for domestic and commercial use. Most of these firms also provided patented boiler systems. After the Civil War, similar firms were founded in the United States. The most prominent of these was the Lord & Burnham Company which grew into America's largest greenhouse manufacturer, producing both large and small hot houses.²

The Weir Greenhouse - A History

The Weir Greenhouse was built by James Weir, Jr., a member of a family that had long been active in local horticulture. The family business was established in Bay Ridge in 1850 by James Weir, a Scottish immigrant. In the 1870s James' sons John and Frederick joined the firm, which was renamed James Weir & Sons. By 1886 the company maintained twenty-five "well equipped" greenhouses at Bay Ridge and several "well-managed nurseries" at New Utrecht.³ James Weir's oldest son James Weir, Jr. (born in England in 1843) worked with his father for a few years, but established his own florist business in 1861.⁴ In 1866 he moved his business to 24th Street and Fifth Avenue near Greenwood Cemetery. This business soon moved to 25th Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues, and in 1880 Weir commissioned a wood and glass greenhouse for the site at the corner of 25th Street and Fifth Avenue where the establishment is still located. This new building was designed, not by a commercial greenhouse manufacturer, but by the prominent local architect Mercein Thomas, who was responsible for a large number of extremely fine Romanesque Revival and Queen style residences in Brooklyn's choicest residential neighborhoods. This greenhouse, which was illustrated in Henry Stiles' History of Kings County and the City of Brooklyn, was a simple rectangular structure, 40 feet wide and 55 feet long. The entrance was contained within a corner tower which had a pyramidal roof capped by a weathervane (see illustration). Stiles described this greenhouse and its contents:

[those] who pass Mr. Weir's charming conservatory, redolent with the perfumes of the rarest exotics and native flowers, find this one of the chief attractions of the Cemetery, which never fails to elicit the warmest admiration....

In arrangement of the plants in Mr. Weir's conservatory one can not fail to observe the artistic skill in which each plant is so placed in relation to another as to produce the most exquisite harmony of color and form, enhanced by the fine arrangement of the grand center, composed of rock work.⁵

The small greenhouse remained un use until 1895 when Weir applied to the Brooklyn Buildings Department for a permit to alter the building. This alteration was so extensive that very little, if any, of the original greenhouse survives. As in 1880, Weir did not turn to a firm that specialized in greenhouse construction, but hired architect George Curtis Gillespie who had offices in Manhattan, but lived near the greenhouse. In addition, Gillespie is known to have designed an unidentified building known as the Weir Warehouse (1900).⁶

By the time the enlarged greenhouse was built, James Weir, Jr., had established the firm of James Weir, Jr. & Son with James E. Weir who became his father's partner in 1888. In 1894 Edward Weir, probably James E. Weir's son, entered the firm. In that year the firm opened a branch at the southern entrance to Greenwood Cemetery on Fort Hamilton Avenue near Gravesend Avenue. All three Weirs lived on 25th Street in houses located near the greenhouse. James Weir, Jr. lived at 236 25th Street for most of his adult life and James E. and Edward Weir lived at No. 228, which still stands.

While the firm headed by James Weir, Jr. prospered near Greenwood Cemetery, the firm run by his father and brothers had moved into downtown Brooklyn. At various times in the 1890s and early twentieth century the business run by the two branches of the Weir family seem to have joined together, but it remains unclear exactly what the relationship was between James Weir & Sons and James Weir, Jr. & Son. The Weir family retained ownership of the greenhouse on Fifth Avenue and 25th Street until 1971 when it was sold to its present owners.

The Weir florist was one of several greenhouses built in the nineteenth century near the entrances to Greenwood Cemetery. The cemetery, founded in 1838, had become by the mid-nineteenth century, an enormously popular attraction visited by thousands of people who came to attend funerals and visit gravesites, as well as simply to walk through the beautifully landscaped grounds. The celebration of death was an important feature of nineteenth-century American culture, and elaborate rituals developed which concerned the treatment of the dead and the conduct of the living. Flowers and wreaths played an important role in death ceremonies and could be readily supplied by the florists and greenhouses near the entrances to Greenwood. The Weir greenhouse is the only one of these establishments to remain today. The survival of this greenhouse may be due to the fact that it is located directly across from the main cemetery gates, on one of the best sites in the area. The other greenhouses were located slightly to the north on 24th Street or on 25th Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues.

Description

Although the forms and massing of the Weir Greenhouse are extremely bold and impressive, the detailing is simple and straightforward. The building has a rectangular plan enlivened by projecting bays and domes. The greenhouse is a wood-frame structure enclosing glass panes, and has glass and galvanized-iron roof surfaces. The main entrance is set at an angle to the street corner, as was the entrance to the original 1880 greenhouse, and takes the form of an octagon. The double-entry doors are flanked by wide window expanses with transoms. A frieze and cornice separate the transoms from a narrow clerestory. The sloping roof above the clerestory is capped by an octagonal cupola with a ball finial.

The main elevations of the building contain the arrangement of the large areas of glass set below narrow transoms seen at the entrance. At the south end of the Fifth Avenue frontage is a projecting rounded bay with a glass roof. On 25th Street, the facade is interrupted by a projecting rectangular entrance bay with

round-arched double doors set within a glass frame divided by wood mullions that form a fan. At the rear of this elevation is an angled bay capped by a frieze ornamented with blind round arches. A brick office extension is located to the rear.

The building is topped by a sloping glass roof that rises to meet the large octagonal dome which crowns the building. This dome has glass side walls and a metal roof that terminates at a point. A sign that originally read "WEIR" and now has the name "McGOVERN" added, rests on the apex of the roof and supports a weathervane.

The Weir sign would originally have been visible above the surrounding buildings. Visitors to Greenwood Cemetery would have been aware, at some distance, of the presence of this establishment and could plan a visit before entering the cemetery. Today, the McGovern-Weir sign still advertises the presence of the greenhouse which is well known to cemetery visitors and Brooklyn residents alike. The care with which this delicate structure has been maintained is exemplary and landmark designation is both a recognition of the beauty, significance, and rarity of the greenhouse and a tribute to the respect that its present owners have in its continuing survival in the ever-changing city.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart
Senior Landmarks Preservation Specialist

Report typed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. Information on the history of the greenhouse is from John Hix, The Glass House (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974).
2. The company, located in Irvington, New York, is still in business.
3. Henry Stiles, The History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), p. 1364.
4. City of Brooklyn: Half Centuries Progress, 1886, p. 148.
5. Stiles, p. 1364.
6. Dennis Francis, Architects in Practice-New York City 1840-1900, (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), p. 89.

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 Weir Greenhouse (now McGovern-Weir Greenhouse) 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 Weir Greenhouse, an extremely rare survivor from the nineteenth century, is the only known Victorian commercial greenhouse in New York City; that the forms and massing of the greenhouse are bold and impressive, while the detailing is simple and straightforward; that it was built for the Weir family business which had a long tradition of horticultural activities in Brooklyn; that its presence and survival are integrally linked to the adjacent Greenwood Cemetery; and that this handsome and well-maintained structure continues to serve its original purpose.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 80A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Weir Greenhouse (now McGovern-Weir Greenhouse), southwest corner Fifth Avenue and 25th Street Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 655, Lot 31, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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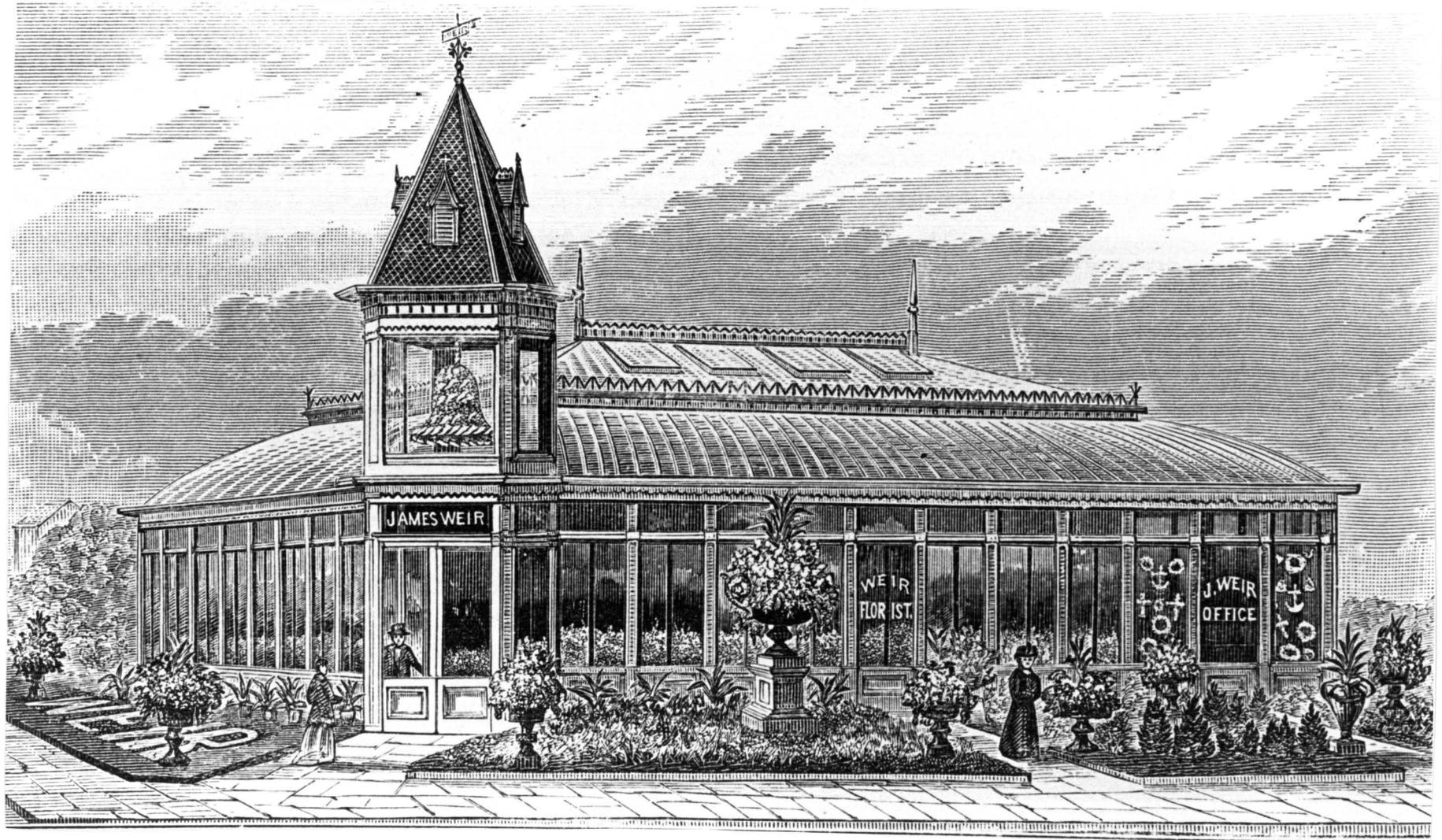
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"JAMES WEIR'S CONSERVATORIES AND GREEN-HOUSES"
(From Henry Stiles, History of Kings County
and the City of Brooklyn, 1884, p. 1364)
Built 1880; Architect Mercein Thomas



WEIR GREENHOUSE
(now McGovern-Weir Greenhouse)
Fifth Avenue and 25th Street
Brooklyn
Built 1895

Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

Architect: G. Curtis Gillespie