

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
March 18, 1986; Designation List 184  
LP-1415

FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING, 551 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1926-27; architects: H. Douglas Ives and Sloan & Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1281, Lot 1

On January 11, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Fred F. French Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing was continued to February 8, 1983 (Item No. 5). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The Commission has received several letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation. One letter was written in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Located on the northeast corner of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue, the Fred F. French Building was constructed in 1926-27 as corporate headquarters for the prominent real estate firm of the same name. A proto-Art Deco design, with strong Near Eastern influences, it represents the stylistic compromise between lingering historicism and the modernistic trends that typified the architecture of the late 1920s. The Near Eastern allusion is enhanced by a dramatic series of setbacks. Although mandated by the Building Code of 1916, these wedding cake-like tiers found a romantic corollary in Assyrian ziggurats. The setbacks taper off to a lofty terraced tower which enriches the midtown skyline with iconographic bas-reliefs, Mesopotamian in both their imagery and execution in richly colored faience. Together with ornamental friezes and other polychromatic details, the reliefs contrast to splendid effect with the building's limestone trim and russet-colored brick walls. The exotic character of the 38-story structure is especially notable at ground level where two bronze entrances and fifteen commercial bays are embellished with mythological figures and a wealth of Near Eastern flora.

The Fred F. French Building is a significant example of distinctive corporate imagery dating from the era of New York's greatest building boom. Financed by the first commercial application of Fred French's cooperative investment plan, the building was broadly applauded for its ornament, technological advances and unusually accomplished planning. Among its other amenities were close proximity to Grand Central Terminal and a prime location in the rapidly developing business district at midtown Fifth Avenue. Upon its completion in 1927, the French Building was also renowned as one of the two tallest structures in the vicinity. And while that claim was subsequently relinquished, it remains a strikingly individual monument, conspicuous on its corner site against the backdrop of more conservative, frequently classicizing, limestone masses. Aside from various

ground floor alterations, the French Building survives substantially intact as a compelling response to the zoning ordinance and a distinguished example of architectural eclecticism in the late 1920s. In contrast with the sculptural terminations of most contemporaneous tall buildings and especially with the spiky peaks of slightly later skyscrapers, the French Building is set apart by its flat utilitarian roof. Glazed symbolic panels mask its water tower and glisten brilliantly in the sun, making the French Building immediately recognizable among neighboring towers. The panels were a unique contribution to the midtown skyline in 1927, and remain so to this day.

#### Development of the Midtown Business Center

The mid- and late 1920's witnessed an unprecedented building boom in midtown Manhattan. Indeed, construction along Fifth Avenue was so active that it was hailed as "the seventh wonder of twentieth-century commerce."<sup>1</sup> Growing apace were the Grand Central Zone immediately to the east, and the Garment Center on the west, the latter located between 30th and 40th Streets, off Sixth Avenue. Broadway theater construction was simultaneously proceeding at break-neck speed, adding some forty-five playhouses to the area around Times Square in the first two decades of the century alone. By 1930 the total had surpassed eighty.<sup>2</sup> A major thoroughfare through the theater zone is Sixth Avenue which was forecast in the late 1920s as Manhattan's new commercial frontier. Expectations for its revival were encouraged by plans for the imminent demolition of the Sixth Avenue El (which, however, did not occur until 1940). Sixth Avenue thus held great interest for New York's major real estate developers, not the least of whom was Fred F. French.<sup>3</sup>

Concurrent building activity in eastern midtown was propelled by Warren & Wetmore's Grand Central Terminal (completed in 1913). The focus of east side commuter traffic, it played a pivotal role in the area's development as a financial center, ranking in importance "second only to Wall Street."<sup>4</sup> The surrounding region was owned by the New York Central Railroad which improved its properties through a coordinated policy for the erection of tall office buildings and hotels. Removal of the 42nd Street spur of the Third Avenue Railway also encouraged growth, leaving the street ripe for commercial development and reclamation by pedestrians and vehicular traffic.<sup>5</sup> The area around 42nd Street thus became a busy link between the Grand Central Zone on the east, Times Square and the booming west side.

Perhaps most spectacular was the development of Fifth Avenue, and particularly its midtown section. On the occasion of the Avenue's centennial in 1924, the Fifth Avenue Association published Fifth Avenue: Old and New in which the two preceding years (1922-24) were cited as the peak of building activity.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent construction, however, proved even greater in scope. The fifteen office buildings constructed in 1925 were "not matched in any year after World War II until 1957. The thirty office buildings constructed in 1926 have not been matched since."<sup>7</sup> The Fred F. French Building was among that record-breaking thirty.

The proliferation of new buildings was fostered by such civic improvements as street widening and repair (widening operations of Fifth

Avenue were first undertaken in 1907, and completed in 1929). Also influential was the strict enforcement of zoning regulations, and other laws affecting realty and business.<sup>8</sup> Statistics indicate that Fifth Avenue frontage represented only 8% (one and a half square miles) of Manhattan's total area, yet in 1926 it comprised 25% of total building investments. Earlier in the century, 45th Street was seen as the northernmost boundary for sound building ventures. However, by 1923 quality construction had already appeared on 46th Street, and in the following years, continued its northward progression along both sides of Fifth Avenue.<sup>9</sup>

One of the independent (non-New York Central Railroad) pioneers in the commercial revitalization of the area was real estate developer Fred F. French. By March of 1925 he had purchased land on the northeast corner of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue. At the time, the properties were occupied by an office building, four dwellings and the Church of the Heavenly Rest, all of which were razed to accommodate the Fred F. French Company's corporate headquarters.<sup>10</sup> The midtown location of the new building was at once boldly calculating and touchingly sentimental: one of the first jobs French had ever held was next to this site as a near-destitute timekeeper at the exclusive Home Club (11 East 45th Street). French never forgot his humble beginnings.

Balancing the romantic was Fred French the astute businessman. In 1859, the corner lots on Fifth Avenue and 45th Street had been estimated at \$2.80 per square foot. By the time French bought them some 65 years later their value had centupled. Nonetheless, the \$250-\$285 per square foot price that French paid for the 19,000 square foot site was a bargain when similar choice properties were being sold for \$300 per square foot or more.<sup>11</sup> French Company stockholders congratulated themselves on "one of the shrewdest real estate purchases on Manhattan Island during the last decade."<sup>12</sup>

#### FRED F. FRENCH

Fred Fillmore French was born on October 14, 1883 at East 86th Street in Manhattan, but subsequently moved with his family to East 162nd Street in the Bronx. His mother was a college graduate and a niece of United States president Millard Fillmore (in honor of whom Fred French received his middle name). French's father, by contrast, was an impoverished cigar maker. He died when French was a child, leaving the boy (the eldest of four children) to help support his family with a variety of part-time jobs.

Upon completion of elementary school, French won the Pulitzer Scholarship to the Horace Mann High School and then attended Princeton for a year, before heading to Mexico "for a taste of ranching."<sup>13</sup> When French returned to New York in 1905, he became interested in building, and



International  
**Fred Fillmore French**

enrolled in an engineering course at Columbia University. He was variously employed as a general utility man, a gang foreman on a reservoir project in White Plains, New York, a building superintendant and most memorably, as timekeeper near the site of his future corporate headquarters. By the time French was forty, he had hired his former teacher from Columbia and many of his early employers to work as vice-presidents in his expanding real estate and building empire.

Fred F. French formed his namesake company in 1910 when he was 27. As president, he drew a \$15 weekly salary, with one small boy as his workforce. Beginning as a humble contractor in the basement of his Bronx home, French soon purchased the property (his first acquisition) and proved himself a financial genius. Despite betrayal by his first partner (a former Alaskan missionary) French recovered, and within a decade of his company's founding arranged for a \$250,000 loan. He used the money to construct a 16-story office building on the northwest corner of 41st Street and Madison Avenue, several floors of which French occupied upon its completion in March, 1920.<sup>14</sup> Barely five years later, he purchased the 45th Street site for new corporate headquarters. Vastly larger than the previous building, more costly and lavish by far, it amply testified to his meteoric rise. Less than fifteen years after establishing his company, French had become one of the foremost developers in New York. His "one and a half-man business" had swelled into a multifaceted operation (ultimately with international involvements) which was staffed by hundreds of employees. When the French Building opened in 1927 the total value of the French Company's activities amounted to no less than \$90,000,000.<sup>15</sup>

At the core of this stunning success was the "French Plan" which Fred French created in 1921. An innovative form of co-investment by the French Company and its tenants/owners, the Plan was based on "making a small profit on a large business as opposed to large profits on a small business."<sup>16</sup> French explained the concept as follows:

It is our belief that the people whose money helped to make such building enterprises possible should receive in addition to safety, a fair share of the profits earned. Accordingly, it was decided that the entire net profits from the operation of a building should be devoted towards repaying the investors, together with 6% cumulative dividends, before any distribution of such profits could be made to the Fred F. French Companies. Thereafter, by equal division of the common stock, the public receives half the profits in perpetuity.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the more common cooperative investment plans, the French Plan turned over land to its investors at actual cost without padding construction or real estate expenses.

Crucial to the success of the French Plan was the comprehensive organization of French's multiple real estate and building concerns. In the course of time, his various involvements developed into individual companies. Each handled a different aspect of French's enterprises, but was united under one president, head architect, builder, owner, contractor and underwriter. According to The Plan, a site was acquired by the Fred F. French Investing Company, and the design and program laid out and



supervised by the Fred F. French Company, Architects and Builders. The Fred F. French Investing Company underwrote and sold the stock for the new corporation (formed in each case for building ownership). The Investing Company retained 50% of the stock for services in underwriting and promotion. Finally, upon completion of the building by the Fred F. French Construction Company, it was turned over to the Fred F. French Management Company.<sup>18</sup>

The Fred F. French Building on Fifth Avenue appears to have been the first commercial application of the French Plan. Prior to 1925-26 The Plan had been restricted to residential properties, including apartment houses at 15, 16, 17 and 55 Park Avenue, 34 East 51st Street, 247 West 75th Street, 22 West 77th and other buildings, including several on Fifth Avenue. Among the latter were apartment houses at numbers 1140 and 1160, and another at 1110 (the penthouse of which French occupied with his family).<sup>19</sup> Also financed by the Plan were two vast East Side enterprises -- Tudor City and Knickerbocker Village -- and it was there that the financial wizardry of Fred French was best revealed.

His \$100,000,000 Tudor City started with the purchase of a five acre site on Prospect Hill in December, 1925. This seemingly undesirable area was located several blocks east of Grand Central Terminal, and was cluttered with tenements, slaughter houses and breweries. By 1930, however, French had transformed the site into an eminently successful residential development. The complex was desirable for the consciously domestic quality of its Tudoresque buildings, and highly attractive for its proximity to the midtown business district. Amid dense urban congestion, French had developed a quiet middle-class garden community from which thousands of tenants could walk to work. The achievement was unprecedented.

The success of Tudor City prompted French to grander visions. In 1928 he organized the \$50,000,000 Fred F. French Operators Inc. Straying from his previous policy of purchasing property specifically for building purposes, French determined to "buy and sell real estate either for quick turn [overs] or to hold for increase in value. The new company," he explained, "being ten times larger than the Fred French Investing Company... could... build ten Tudor Cities!"<sup>20</sup>

French had planned various suburban developments for Westchester and elsewhere in New York, but actually undertook a second large scale complex in Manhattan. As at Tudor City, which was then (1928) under construction, French began Knickerbocker Village by assembling slum acreage (in this case, a "lung block," so named for the prevalence of tuberculosis). The new residential complex was initially designed for occupancy by Wall Street workers, but was modified by federal funding to include lower income housing. The development was located along the East River, several miles south of its Tudor predecessor. Original plans for Knickerbocker Village consisted of a sprawling forty acre site between the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. However, when construction ceased in 1934, barely 25% of the grand scheme had been realized.<sup>21</sup>

Although the Depression and other complications prevented Knickerbocker Village from equaling the immediate success of Tudor City, both ventures were remarkable as the largest land parcels ever assembled in

Manhattan up until their time.<sup>22</sup> The Fred F. French Building was conceived in 1925 within months of Tudor City's inception. It was completed in October of 1927, just prior to the assemblage of Knickerbocker Village. More than just a center of operations, French's new building on prestigious Fifth Avenue was to be a tangible monument to his success (as its multiple inscriptions and Fred French monograms amply attest). It figured prominently on the masthead of The Voice, the French Company's monthly publication, where the French Building served as the centerpiece of other structures by French.



French was married, had four children and countless business contacts, yet he claimed to have few acquaintances.<sup>23</sup> His primary interest was his work. French devoted himself indefatigably to all facets of his business, including primary authorship for many articles in The Voice and even daily pep talks to his large staff. Each morning, precisely at nine o'clock, employees gathered in the auditorium of the French Building to hear the Gospel according to their president. He sometimes addressed specific corporate issues, but was more often concerned with attitude and the mentality of success, encouraging his workers with evangelistic zeal to "get smiling into [their] systems." In a very personal interpretation of Christian belief, French commended Christ as "the best salesman of all time" and His life, the "best example of a [successful] sales" pitch.<sup>24</sup> He preached the Biblical proverb "Knock and it shall be opened unto you," which in this case became a motto for unflagging persistence and the refusal to accept "NO" for an answer.

French's absolute dedication continued until 1936 when he died unexpectedly at age 52. Since the completion of his corporate offices some nine years prior, French had occupied the building's twelfth and thirteenth floors (still partially occupied by the firm at this writing). In the months preceding his death French was working in these offices on new developments for Manhattan. Although details of the various schemes were not disclosed, some idea of their scope might be found in one of French's unrealized projects. In December, 1929 he announced plans to construct an 83-story building on Sixth Avenue. At 1,100 feet, the skyscraper would have easily surpassed the Chrysler Building (1,046') which itself had recently eclipsed the Woolworth Building as the tallest in the world.<sup>25</sup>

French was eulogized with fulsome praise for his foresight and skill in property assemblage, but his real genius was recognized as financial. One contemporary critic noted perceptively that French's success would have been impossible "without the vast resources attained through the French Plan."<sup>26</sup> The combination of both real estate and financial prowess had placed him among the greatest developers in New York. Yet despite this distinction, French himself technically owned no property. "All of his enterprises were registered under the names of corporations, each formed specifically for building ownership."<sup>27</sup>

### The Architects

Fred French's personal involvement in his business included basic architectural design (although the extent of his input has not been determined). Contemporaries recalled how he "dash[ed] up to the drafting room [to lay] out an apartment house or an office building. A plan," French claimed, "was the only fun he [got] out of life."<sup>28</sup> Under normal circumstances, the building was then worked up by staff architects under H. Douglas Ives. To the dismay of the architectural community, French did not employ outside designers. His new corporate headquarters, however, proved an exception. Intended as a potent architectural statement, corporate (and personal) advertisement, as well as a profitable investment, French strayed from his normal policy and engaged the firm of Sloan & Robertson as consulting architects. Clyde R. Place was employed as consulting engineer.<sup>29</sup>

The division of labor among the various architects is unclear, but it appears likely that Sloan & Robertson had primary responsibility for the French Building's design. Although their partnership was only a year old when plans were filed in 1925, both men (aged 37 and 47 respectively) had distinguished themselves as skilled designers, particularly in the Grand Central Zone. In previous partnership with his father, Thomas Markoe Robertson (1878-1962) had amassed considerable experience in office building design while John Sloan (1888-1954) had recently gained prominence as the architect of the Pershing Square Building.

Sloan & Robertson's success as consulting architects of the French Building may have led to their commission for the Chanin Building. Begun in 1927 when the French Building was still under construction,<sup>30</sup> it was executed as the corporate headquarters for one of Fred French's major competitors. Significantly, Irwin S. Chanin, like French, deviated from his normal in-house design policy to commission Sloan & Robertson. For him they erected a 57-story Art Deco building on 42nd Street (just three blocks south of the French Building -- and surpassing it by nineteen floors). In spite of their differences, the two structures are nonetheless similar as a brick tower atop a pyramidal base with bronze framed shopfronts, decorative bronze fascia and terra cotta ornament. A related commission was the neighboring thirty-story Graybar Building on 42nd Street.<sup>31</sup> Completed in 1927, it offered a million square feet of space, making it the largest (but not the tallest) office building in the world. Like the French Building, the Graybar has an eclectic ornamental scheme with strong Near Eastern influence. And like the Chanin, it was executed for one of French's rivals, in this case, Todd, Robertson & Todd. In what was by now a

pattern, the firm engaged Sloan & Robertson over design by staff architects. As a result of their success at the Graybar and other modern office buildings (most notably the Cunard), Todd, Robertson & Todd won the privileged role in 1928 as developers of Rockefeller Center.

H. Douglas Ives, by contrast, most likely supervised construction in addition to making valuable contributions regarding the French Company's requirements. A skilled designer in his own right, he had been head architect of the French Company for approximately one year and was doubtless in close contact with its president. Ives later repeated the general setback massing of the French Building in the Hotel Tudor which he built in 1930-32 as the twelfth unit of Tudor City.

#### H. Douglas Ives

H. Douglas Ives was born in Montreal, Canada in 1888.<sup>32</sup> He received his architectural education and practiced in Toronto until 1914, when he served in Europe with the Canadian military forces. After World War I, Ives relocated to New York. He was employed for a period by Cass Gilbert, but subsequently established an independent practice. By 1924-25 (when Ives was first listed in the New York City directory), he had already joined the Fred F. French Company. He served as its chief designer for ten years, executing not only the French Building, but also the Hotel Everglades in Miami, and most of the buildings in Tudor City, as well as other apartment and commercial buildings for French. In addition, Ives worked for French's concerns in London. A member of the Architectural League of New York, Ives was associated in 1944 with T.E. Rhoades, a local building contractor and engineer. Their brief collaboration terminated with Ives' death in the following year (1945).

#### Sloan & Robertson

Born in New York in 1888 and professionally trained at New York University, John Sloan went into business for himself in 1905, at age 21.<sup>33</sup> Three years later, he moved to the Philippine Islands as Architect and Superintendent of Construction for the War Department. During World War I Sloan did construction work for the American Expeditionary Force in France, and also served as a member of the Army Air Service Advisory Board in Washington. He returned to private practice in 1920 when he became associated with York & Sawyer on the design of the Pershing Square Building. The new structure was located at 100 East 42nd Street on the southeast corner of Park Avenue, just one block north of French's first corporate headquarters at 41st and Madison Avenue. The Pershing Square Building received a good deal of attention, particularly for its tone-varied brick and terra cotta ornament,<sup>34</sup> an aesthetic which Sloan quickly repeated at an apartment house at 898 Park Avenue (1923). Sloan leased space in the Pershing Square Building in 1923, and in the following year opened an office there with his new partner, Thomas Markoe Robertson.

Robertson was born in 1878 to the eminent late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architect, Robert H. Robertson.<sup>35</sup> He graduated from Yale in 1901 and subsequently trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Father

and son formed a partnership (R.H. Robertson & Son) in 1908 and practiced together until the former died in 1919. Thereafter Thomas Markoe Robertson collaborated with noted theater architect Henry B. Herts on plans for a Victory Memorial entertainment and sports complex.<sup>36</sup> An ambitious Beaux-Arts project, it was designed to complement Grand Central Terminal which it was to face on the south (on the entire block between 41st and 42nd Streets, Park and Lexington Avenues. The venture ultimately collapsed under economic pressures and, several years later, John Sloan erected the Pershing Square Building on the proposed Victory Memorial site.

During Sloan & Robertson's extended association, Sloan was responsible for the engineering and financial promotion of the firm's work. Specializing in institutional and commercial buildings, most frequently of Art Deco design, the firm's most notable commissions included the \$30,000,000 Wards Island Sewerage Disposal Plant, Rikers Island Penitentiary, and the East Terminus at Montauk, Long Island. In Manhattan, they executed the Maritime Exchange Building at 80 Broad Street, an office building at 29 Broadway, the Plaza Building at 625 Madison Avenue, the Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village (demolished) and apartment houses at 1 Beekman Place and 895 Park Avenue, as well as the annex to the St. Regis Hotel. Sloan had also designed the West Side Highway (1930) between Canal and 72nd Streets (partially demolished). The works which established Sloan & Robertson as leading skyscraper designers, however, were the Chanin and Graybar buildings both of which were prefigured by the French Building.

#### The Fred F. French Building

Plans for the Fred F. French Building were filed on August 25, 1925.<sup>37</sup> They originally called for a 31-story office building, nearly 385' high. The proposal was altered within a month to include two additional floors, only to have the amended scheme disapproved because its height exceeded the zoning ordinance. In response, Sloan & Robertson petitioned and were granted a variance by the Board of Standards and Appeals.<sup>38</sup> In the end, the French Building rose 38 stories including a triplex penthouse for a total height of 416'7". It was the second tallest building in the vicinity, surpassed only by the 432' Harriman Building one block to the south, on the northeast corner of 44th Street and Fifth Avenue (former site of the famous Delmonico's restaurant). Completed by architect H. Craig Severance just five months before the French Building, this classicizing skyscraper proved the perfect foil. Its limestone and buff brick walls emphasized the French Building's rich coloration and exotic decoration while its simple, if imposing, mass underlined the most provocative aspects of French's proto-Art Deco design. In 1927 the two new buildings loomed over lowrise Fifth Avenue like the advance guard of its progressive commercialization. They dominated -- at least temporarily -- the midtown skyline.

Work on the French Building began on May 22, 1926. Its steel skeleton topped off four months later. Had the scheduled completion date been met, the French Building would have been the tallest on midtown Fifth Avenue, but unforeseen delays stalled opening for seven months (October 24, 1927)



by which time the Harriman Building had usurped the distinction.<sup>39</sup> Three years later, in December 1930, Douglas H. Ives filed an application for the conversion of the building's 36th and 37th penthouse floors for use as office space.<sup>40</sup> The alteration was in keeping with French's primary intention to exploit the site's full development potential and thereby maximize its rental value.

Another indication of the primary consideration for profit is evident in the location of the building's major entrance on 45th Street.<sup>41</sup> The site's great length along the side street permitted a wide, bronze arched portal and marble vestibule into the lobby. By contrast, prime Fifth Avenue frontage was reserved for high income rental space. One enters the building from Fifth Avenue through an arch which is similar to, although narrower than, that on 45th Street, and approaches the lobby only through a long corridor flanked by retail spaces.

The French Building was praised in its day as "one of the most notable achievements in architectural design...as well as an excellent example of the extensive use of electricity in large buildings." Technologically innovative, it was equipped with such modern devices as an electric plumbing system with variable speed motors, conveniently controlled lighting and ventilation, and most notably, an automatic, self-levelling elevator system which "approach[ed] perfection as nearly as anything [could]."<sup>42</sup> Beyond its technological efficiency, the building was prized for its prime location and elegant decoration as well as its planning excellence, and was commended by the Building Planning Service of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers for "the most complete" plans it had ever seen.<sup>43</sup> The structure was also praised as a creative response to the Building Code of 1916. In short, the French Building was "one of the most popular business palaces in the entire midtown section."<sup>44</sup>

The Building Code had been enacted to ensure adequate amounts of light and air for buildings and pedestrians at street level. In compliance, tall structures were arranged in tiers, producing more three-dimensional buildings. Tapered towers, set back from their bases, now became freestanding sculptural forms, with all four elevations exposed. Not surprisingly, the Building Code brought about a greater attention to silhouette. Prior to this legislation urban architectural design was largely a question of articulating a single planar facade, or two when a building occupied a corner site. The stepped masses now legally required gave birth to "a distinctly American type of architecture"<sup>45</sup> about whose "mass and stamina" contemporary critics frequently rhapsodized. Set back buildings were valued for being "different from anything ever seen before, and what's more, beautiful. The change in mass and form [was observed as] rapidly and silently revolutionizing the entire [city] fabric."<sup>46</sup> Writing in 1928, architectural critic George Edgell declared the new zoning law "the most interesting single phenomenon in American architecture" of his era.<sup>47</sup>

There was little significant construction in the years immediately after World War I and thus the conspicuous impact of the 1916 Building Code was delayed. Its dramatic potential was popularized almost single-handedly by the architectural draftsman Hugh Ferriss whose series of enormously influential "zoning envelopes" was published as illustrations to an article

in the New York Times on March 19, 1922.<sup>48</sup>

One of the earliest concrete manifestations of the Building Code appeared in the award winning Shelton Hotel (rechristened the Halloran House in 1978). It was executed on Lexington Avenue between 48th and 49th Streets by Arthur Loomis Harmon (who, six years later, was associated with Richmond Shreve and William Lamb on the design of the Empire State Building, 1930-32.) A severely imposing structure arranged in three major setbacks, the 34-story Shelton was the tallest hotel in the world. It was completed to great fanfare in March, 1923.<sup>49</sup> Plans for the French Building were filed two years later. Taller and much more animated than the Shelton, it was one of the boldest and most creative responses to the Building Code that had yet appeared.

Because of the French Building's location on an irregular corner site, it was controlled by the different zoning regulations governing Fifth Avenue and narrower 45th Street. The attempt at both legal compliance and rental maximization led to the building's four distinctly different elevations, each developed to zoning and site limitations. So complete was the French Building's embodiment of the Building Code that its photograph was included in the American Heritage Dictionary as a classic illustration of the word "setback."<sup>50</sup> Its lofty rectangular tower rests atop a pyramidal base which is massed above the eleventh floor like so many boxes piled high. Later buildings would respond to the Building Code more soberly, with fewer, larger and more simple, setbacks.

With the development of skeletal framing grew the aesthetic of great height and the need for practical as well as expressive curtain walls. This was particularly true as the Building Code had also restricted projections of more than eighteen inches from a facade, a measure which weaned architects from such classical ornament as boldly protruding cornices and freestanding sculpture.

Like Cass Gilbert at the Woolworth Building and Raymond Hood at the Chicago Tribune, many architects found Gothic an attractive alternative, its characteristic verticality lending itself easily to the lofty modern skyscraper. Romanesque offered another promising solution, as Sloan had demonstrated at the Pershing Square Building. Ives and Sloan & Robertson had considered both of these medieval styles for the French Building.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, they executed French's executive offices in a Tudor motif<sup>52</sup> (complementing the broad medievalism of his contemporaneous residential development at Tudor City). Ultimately the architects abandoned their medieval cladding proposal, and articulated the French Building in the less expensive, more exotic (and conspicuous) Near Eastern aesthetic of polychromed mural surfaces.

Contemporary critics applauded architectural polychromy for its positive psychological effect. Color, they claimed, relieved "the sense of confusion in the street, and the sense of oppression of tall building."<sup>53</sup> It provided a strong decorative quality without depending on the three-dimensional projections to which the Building Code objected while simultaneously compensating for the loss of contrasting lights and shadows. Because Near Eastern architects had little native stone, they had relied on terra cotta tiles for structural as well as ornamental needs. The "breadth and simplicity" of the solution was particularly appealing to

modern architects who, in the last throes of historicism, simultaneously explored the new functional aesthetic. Ives himself justified its application at the French Building when he wrote that:

Color has always played an important role in the architecture of the East and Far East, so it was natural we should turn to the early work of these countries for our guidance. As the likeness of the mass of the French Building recalled strongly the form of Assyrian ziggurats, or observation towers, such as the Tower of the Seven Planets at Babylon, the walls of each terrace of which were built entirely of enameled brick in various colors, we felt we might safely adapt these Assyrian or Chaldean forms of ornament which were peculiarly suitable to flat surfaces.<sup>54</sup>

Because of its pronounced Near Eastern influence the French Building has been called New York's only Mesopotamian skyscraper.<sup>55</sup> But rather than comprising a distinct architectural style, these exotic allusions are better seen as part of the multiple forces at work in architectural design of the late 1920s. Interest in Egypt and the Near East (heightened in 1922 by Howard Carter's momentous discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb) coincided with inspiration from France, Vienna, contemporary films, the new machine aesthetic and other sources, including Mayan civilization. Theorists and architects alike recognized the similarities wrought by the Building Code with MesoAmerican and Near Eastern tombs and temples. Harvey Corbett, for instance, predicted that American cities would someday resemble a vast collection of Egyptian pyramids,<sup>56</sup> while others recommended the stepped prototypes for their logical geometric form<sup>57</sup> and effective polychromatic ornament.<sup>58</sup> The latter aspect was especially advanced by Ely Jacques Kahn in such buildings as the Furniture Exchange (1926) at 206 Lexington Avenue and most conspicuously, in the 2 Park Avenue Building which was completed in November, 1927, just one month after the French Building.<sup>59</sup> Other manifestations of the same exotic influences appeared in New York, for example, in the decoration of the Chrysler Building (1929-30), in several large contemporaneous apartment houses by Schwarz & Gross and more subtly, in the Egyptianizing aspects of Rockefeller Center where buildings were further enriched by the modern corporate equivalent of Babylon's rooftop gardens.

Like most skyscrapers, the French Building was designed for visibility at both close range and from a distance. As the principal aim of its decorative program was to advertise the Fred French Company, ornament was placed where it would best be seen: at the top of the tower, along the building's multiple setbacks and especially in the ground level entrances and commercial bays, all of which were lavishly embellished in bronze. Because decoration, and not archaeological veracity, was the primary consideration, Ives and Sloan & Robertson made no attempt at historical accuracy. Within the French Building's general Mesopotamian character there exists a wide array of Near Eastern and classical motifs.

Bronze	On the ground floor the building's two entrances and fifteen
Frieze	commercial bays are crowned by a segmented bronze frieze. The
	metopes are inhabited by winged Assyrian beasts, each

separated by stylized penta- or tetraglyphs (vestiges of classical Greek triglyphs, here elaborated and Egyptianized with lotus and papyrus stalks).

Entrance            The elaborate bronze entrance arches are framed by a Greco-  
Arches            Egyptian molding of lotus and papyrus, and rest atop coffered  
                 Renaissance piers. Compressed in the arches' spandrels are  
figures reminiscent of the Medici tombs. Their almost two-dimensional  
handling, however, is more closely akin to formal Egyptian works than to  
Michelangelo's forceful plasticity. The male figure on the left holds a  
column in his right hand and in his left, a compass and two T-squares  
(symbols of architecture and building). In the right spandrel a female  
companion holds a beehive. A common symbol for industry (and one  
especially appropriate for Fred French), the motif is repeated at the top  
of the building's tower in two giant faience panels on the east and west  
elevations. The lavish embellishments of the entrances are continued in  
the outer vestibule on Fifth Avenue, the vault of which is inhabited by a  
polychromatic menagerie of winged Mesopotamian beasts. Similarly treated  
is the enclosed vestibule on 45th Street which, together with the first  
floor lobby, is the subject of the Fred F. French Building interior  
designation report.

Setbacks            Like many Art Deco skyscrapers, the Fred French Building  
                 followed Assyrian ziggurats in its hierarchic  
coloration. The building's lower setbacks are emphasized by limestone-  
trimmed friezes of black ornament on a terra cotta ground, recalling  
ancient Greek pottery in both their pigment geometric patterns.

Tower                The building's tower, by contrast, is relieved by the  
Bas-reliefs        lighter and brighter culmination of the entire decorative  
                 program. Especially notable is a frieze of orange and  
green serpents interlaced with an almost Art Nouveau fluidity. Above, on  
the broad north and south elevations, are identical rectangular panels of  
brilliant orange, green, red and gold faience. In the center of each bas  
relief is a rising sun, a common motif in architectural decoration of the  
late 1920s. Symbolizing Progress, it is flanked on either side by a  
winged griffon (Integrity and Watchfulness). The motif is framed on the  
right and left by a beehive encircled with golden bees, symbols of Industry  
and Thrift. The narrow north and south elevations of the rectangular tower  
are emblazoned with the framed head of Mercury, god of commerce and divine  
messenger.<sup>60</sup> Unlike other skyscrapers in New York which depended primarily  
on silhouette for skyline impact, the Fred French Building was unique in  
its roofline iconographic program. Centrally located in low-rise, but  
rapidly developing midtown, it was a conspicuous advertisement for The  
French Plan, the numerous French companies and the man who master-minded  
them all.

## Description

The Fred F. French Building is located on the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 45th Street, on a rectangular site with a twenty foot projection on the north. A skeletal steel structure, it is sheathed in russet-colored brick with limestone trim and polychromatic faience ornament, and is relieved on the ground floor by bronze-framed bays and ornamental fascia. The building has a tripartite configuration: 1) a three-story limestone base with fifteen commercial bays and an elaborate arched entrance on both Fifth Avenue and 45th Street; 2) a pyramidal midsection which rises sheer to the eleventh floor before receding in a series of setbacks; and 3) a rectangular tower which rises sheer to the 35th floor before setting back with a triplex penthouse. The tower terminates with a water tower, elaborately masked by large faience bas-reliefs and crowned by a utilitarian flat roof.

Each of the building's four elevations has its own distinct massing. The west facade on Fifth Avenue and south facade on 45th Street are completely exposed. The north and east elevations, by contrast, are abutted by later construction and therefore only partially visible from the street. They are, however, clearly visible from tall buildings in the area.

### Fifth Avenue Facade

#### THE BASE

Six double story limestone piers divide the Fifth Avenue facade into an entrance and four commercial bays. A historical view (see p. 29) of the northernmost bay on Fifth Avenue depicts an original glass shopfront with granite water table and recessed central entrance crowned by a bronze lower signage fascia (concealing a retractable awning) above which was a ribbon of five multipane windows, and decorative bronze frieze.

Bronze Frieze	Bordered by a lower geometric molding and separated by pentaglyphs (or in some cases, tetraglyphs) of lotus and papyrus stalks, the frieze's five metopes are inhabited by winged Assyrian beasts, each resting on a beveled ground and crowned by an abstracted forest pattern. A continuous row of round-headed studs lies along the upper edge of the frieze, followed by a rosette molding and another of anthemion and lotus.
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2nd-story	Above the latter molding lie the second-story steel framed tri-partite windows: a large stationary pane flanked on either side by a pair of narrow lights, some divided by full or partial transom bars. The mullions between the central and side lights are fluted and crowned by small Ionic capitals. A ribbed bronze molding runs from the granite water table and frames the entire two-story bay. All of the
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shopfronts have been altered. Their condition at the time of designation is recorded below (current photographs on file). The bays are listed from north to south.

Above the 2nd story windows is a limestone frieze in the center of which applied bronze letters identify the building as: "THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING." Two angled wooden flagpoles with bronze anchors project above the second and fifth piers.

3rd story Introduced on the third floor is the standard window type used throughout the building's mid-section and tower (excepting the uppermost penthouse story): one-over-one double hung steel sash, recessed slightly from the plane of the facade. The third story is crowned by a limestone cornice, studded with rosettes and bordered by an upper chevron molding.

1st Bay -granite water table removed  
-new glass shopfront and door; original bronze-ribbed frame partially overlaid by new flat bronze frame  
-new lower louvre and upper signage fascias  
-original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs; see p. 14)  
-2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides both side light pairs

2nd Bay (Entrance) The bronze entrance consists of an elaborate arch, the front and back faces of which are embossed with a lotus and papyrus molding. The arch rests atop grooved capitals and piers with octagonal coffers and rosette inserts on a floral ground. The same coffers appear on the arch intrados, interrupted only by two small recessed downlights. The piers are supported on polished granite bases (connected by a matching granite pavement slab). The arch spandrels are occupied by symbolic bronze figures (See p. 13 above). Surmounting the arch is a black metal fascia where the building is identified with applied bronze letters ("THE FRENCH BUILDING"). Above the fascia is a decorative bronze frieze, differing from the others only in its tetraglyphs (See "BRONZE FRIEZE," p. 14 above). The second story windows have a full transom over the left side lights; transom over the right light of right pair.

Outer Vestibule The outer vestibule is crowned by a depressed barrel vault and flanked on either side by a bronze-framed display window. That on the south has a single bronze muntin. The vault is relieved by painted stepped corners and paired winged beasts in polychromatic bas-relief. From the geometric pattern at the center of the vault hangs a crystal and bronze chandelier, specially designed by the architects to be non-shadow producing. The vault is connected to the display windows by a bronze cornice which repeats at larger scale the lotus-anthemion molding of the facade's bronze frieze. The vestibule's Italian travertine floor is inlaid with beige Kato stone diamonds and border and a narrower border of black Belgian and white Dover marble triangles between brass strips. The side walls of the vestibule terminate at each end with golden veined St. Genevieve

marble pilasters, each ornamented with applied bronze spears and crowned by a beveled capital with a gilded diaper-patterned surface.

At the far end of the vestibule is an elaborate bronze entrance with two revolving doors, the glass lights of which are surrounded by embossed rosettes. Projecting from the jambs are bundled shaft half-columns on faceted bases. Decoratively bound by rope collars, these Near Eastern-inspired supports are crowned by protome capitals of cast bronze ox heads. A pair of these columns frames the central jamb, the paneled ground of which bears Fred French's monogram ("FFF" in script). The columns support a bronze frieze with floral-topped pentaglyphs and two dark brown inscription panels: "THE FRENCH BUILDING" above the left door; "551 FIFTH AVENUE" above the right. The frieze is topped by a row of dentils and a parapet of stepped castellations, each studded with a rosette. Set back, and rising above the parapet is a transparent glass screen with decorative bronze muntins and colonnette mullions. The seven lower lights of the screen are arranged in a tall arcade (with a single prominent muntin). This is topped by a bronze-framed lunette of small multipane windows which extends to the underside of the vault.

- 3rd Bay
  - new glass shopfront and door; new bronze frame inserted within original bronze ribbed frame
  - new upper (signage) and lower (awning) fascias
  - original bronze frieze (with tetraglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bars subdivide both pairs of side lights
- 4th Bay
  - new granite water table
  - new glass shopfront and door; new bronze frame inserted within original bronze-ribbed frame
  - new upper (signage) and lower (awning) fascias
  - original bronze frieze (with tetraglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side lights and left light of right pair.
- 5th Bay
  - new granite water table
  - new glass shopfront and door; new bronze frame inserted within original bronze-ribbed frame
  - new upper (signage) and lower (awning) fascias
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side lights

### 45th Street Facade

Thirteen limestone piers divide the 45th Street facade into an arched entrance and eleven commercial bays. The basic configuration follows that outlined for Fifth Avenue. The condition of the bays at the time of designation is recorded below, listed from west to east.

- 1st Bay
  - new granite water table
  - new display window with central mullion; new bronze frame inserted within original bronze ribbed frame
  - new upper (signage) and lower (awning) fascias
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: no transom bar subdivisions of side lights
- 2nd Bay
  - original granite water table
  - new display window with central mullion; original bronze ribbed frame
  - new projecting enclosed roll-down gate housing
  - original operable awning (lower) fascia
  - new upper signage fascia (blank)
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bars subdivide left side light of pair and right light of right pair
- 3rd Bay
  - original granite water table
  - new display window with prominent muntin
  - original bronze ribbed frame
  - new projecting enclosed roll-down gate housing
  - original operable awning fascia
  - new upper fascia with louvres
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bars subdivide left side light pair and right light of right pair
- 4th Bay
  - original granite water table
  - new display window with prominent muntin
  - original bronze ribbed frame
  - new projecting enclosed roll-down gate housing
  - original operable awning fascia
  - new upper fascia with louvres
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side light of left pair and right side light of right pair.
- 5th Bay
  - original granite water table
  - shopfront with recessed central entrance
  - new bronze frame inserted within original bronze ribbed frame
  - new lower (awning) fascia and upper fascia (with louvres)
  - original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)
  - 2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side light of left pair and right side light of right pair.

- 6th Bay      -original granite water table  
               -new display window with central mullion  
               -original bronze ribbed frame  
               -original operable awning fascia and vertical scissor arms  
               -new upper signage fascia (blank)  
               -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)  
               -2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side light of  
    left pair and right light of right pair
- 7th Bay      -original granite water table  
               -new display window (stenciled)  
               -original bronze ribbed frame  
               -original operable awning fascia with vertical scissor arms  
               -new upper fascia (with louvres)  
               -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)  
               -2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side light of  
    left pair and right light of right pair
- 8th Bay      The entrance on 45th Street is exactly the same as that on  
 (Entrance) Fifth Avenue (see p. 15) except for the insertion of four  
               modern glass doors and a bronze-framed transom behind the arch.  
               The originally open outer vestibule is part of the designation  
               report for the Fred F. French Building Interior.
- The side lights of the second story windows are not subdivided  
               by transom bars.
- 9th Bay      -original granite water table  
               -display window with off-center mullion  
               -original operable awning fascia with vertical scissor arms  
               -original bronze ribbed frame  
               -new upper signage fascia  
               -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)  
               -2nd story windows: no subdivisions of side lights  
               -modern light fixtures to left and right of bay (on  
    9th & 10th piers)
- 10th Bay     -original granite water table  
               -display window with off-center mullion  
               -original operable awning fascia with crank hook on right  
               -original bronze ribbed frame  
               -new upper signage fascia  
               -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)  
               -2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides right side light of  
    left pair; right side lights: no subdivision  
               -modern light fixtures to left and right of bay (on  
    10th & 11th pier)
- 11th Bay     -original granite water table  
               -new restaurant entrance  
               -original bronze ribbed frame  
               -original operable awning fascia with vertical scissor arms  
               -new upper signage fascia  
               -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)

- 2nd story windows: transom bar subdivides left side lights;  
no subdivision of right side lights
- modern light fixtures on left (11th pier)

12th Bay    -original granite water table  
              -original window, mullions and service entrance  
              -original decorative screen over service entrance  
              -original operable awning fascia with crank hook on right  
              -new upper fascia with louvres  
              -original bronze frieze (with pentaglyphs)  
              -2nd story windows: transom bar and louvres subdivide right  
                                  side light of left pair; louvres installed in right side  
                                  light of right pair.

2nd story   -Same as Fifth Avenue facade; no flagpoles.  
 Lintel

3rd story   -Same as Fifth Avenue facade

#### MID-SECTION: 4th - 19th Stories

The russet-brick walls rise flush on all four sides up to the 11th floor after which the building sets back in various configurations according to the zoning ordinance (see photographs). The setbacks (together with significant building lines) are emphasized by limestone-trimmed fascias of red and black faience in geometric patterns, some with gold rosettes. Pier capitals are rendered in light green faience and ornamented with a small rosette. The windows uniformly follow the type described above in "Fifth Avenue Facade; 3rd story." Above most windows are metal spandrels with a decorative checkerboard relief.

#### THE TOWER: 20th - 38th Stories

Girdled by a green and orange faience belt course on the 31st floor, the rectangular tower rises sheer to the 34th story on its narrow east elevation and to several floors higher on the west. The tower's broader north and south sides have gentle recesses. The limestone-trimmed 34th floor has faience spandrels above which is an orange and green frieze of interlaced serpents. The water tower above the 38th floor is masked by symbolic bas reliefs, brightly colored on a light green ground and encircled by a rosette-studded red faience frame (See p. 12-13). On the rear (east) elevation of the tower is an exposed metal firescape. Penthouse windows deviate from the one-over-one double hung steel sash elsewhere in the building. Various configurations exist, most frequently a single pane with divided transom above.



### Conclusion

Built in 1926-27 during New York's greatest building boom, the Fred F. French Building is a significant example of distinctive corporate imagery and a monument to one of New York's greatest developers. It was the personal enterprise of Fred French who, through his multi-faceted real estate and construction companies, oversaw its every detail from property assemblage, to design, construction, financing, leasing and promotion. As one of the earliest and loftiest towers on Fifth Avenue above 42nd Street the building is important for the role it played in the development of the midtown commercial zone. It is notable as a creative response to the Building Code of 1916, and is distinguished for its accomplished blend of lingering historicism and vanguard modernism. It is also unique for its skyline iconography and for its lavish polychromatic and bronze ornament of Near Eastern inspiration. After nearly sixty years the Fred F. French Building survives substantially intact as one of the finest examples in New York of late 1920s exotic architectural design.

Report prepared for the  
Landmarks Preservation Commission by  
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Photo Credits: Janet Adams

## NOTES

1. Henry Collins Brown, Fifth Avenue: Old and New (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Crawford Co., 1924), p. 101.
2. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, NJ: James T. White & Co., 1973), p. 198.
3. See p. 6 n. 28 below.
4. "Unique Low Building for Grand Central District," Real Estate Record and Guide, October 15, 1927, p. 9.
5. "Building Activity on Lexington Avenue," New York Times, March 4, 1928, sec. 12, p. 2.
6. Brown, p. 101.
7. Cervin Robinson and Rosemary Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 12.
8. "Steady Increase Shown in Real Estate Values," New York Times, July 25, 1926, sec. 10, p. 1.
9. Ibid. See also Brown, Fifth Avenue, p. 103.
10. Demolition Permit 227-25. See also "The French Companies Buy Big Plot on Fifth Avenue and 45th Street," New York Times, March 20, 1925, p. 34.
11. The \$250 per square foot price was quoted in "Two Fifth Avenue Corners Compared," The Voice, 2 (December, 1927), 1. The New York Times, however, recorded the higher price of \$285 per square foot ("The French Companies Buy Big Plot," Ibid.). French subsequently confirmed the latter price ("Real Estate Croakers," The Voice, 3 (July 1930), 3).
12. "Two Fifth Avenue Corners..."
13. Fred F. French. Obituary. New York Times, August 31, 1936, p. 15. For additional information on French see his obituary in the Real Estate Record and Guide, September 5, 1936, p. 1 and Robert M. Coates, "Profiles: Realtor [Fred F. French]," The New Yorker, June 1, 1929, p. 22-25.; "Romance in the Lives of City Builders," New York Times, February 24, 1929, sec. 12, p. 3; Murchison, "Architect Tolerates French and His Building," The Architect, 7 (January, 1927), 505, and articles throughout The Voice, the official organ of the Fred F. French Company (published 1926-30).
14. Coates, p. 22.
15. NB364-19. See also "New Home for the Fred F. French Company," New York Times, April 4, 1920, sec. 9, p. 2.

16. "The French Companies," New York Times, November 6, 1927, sec. 12, p. 1.
17. French. Obituary, [New York Times].
18. Ibid. See also "New Ownership Plan for Tenants," New York Times, March 15, 1923, p. 2.
19. Coates, p. 22. See also Fred F. French. Obituary [Real Estate Record and Guide]. See also Fred F. French, The French Plan (New York: Fred F. French Investing Co., 1928) and "New Ownership Plan for Tenants," New York Times, April 15, 1923, p. 2.
20. "French Organizes \$50,000,000 Concern," New York Times, October 30, 1928, p. 52.
21. Fred F. French, "Knickerbocker Village," scrapbook in New York Public Library, 1933-34 [?]. See also Albert Mayer, "A Critique of Knickerbocker Village," Architecture, 71 (January, 1935), 5-10.
22. "First R.F.C. Housing Project," Architectural Forum, 58 (May, 1933), 435.
23. Murchison, p. 505.
24. Coates, p. 23.
25. "French Will Erect Sixth Avenue Skyscraper," Real Estate Record and Guide, December 21, 1929, p. 8. See also "City Rebuilding Needs Public Aid," New York Times, January 26, 1930, sec. 11, p. 2.
26. French. Obituary [Real Estate Record and Guide], p. 1.
27. "Fred F. French Wrought Vast Changes in Manhattan's East Side Skyline," New York Times, September 6, 1936, sec. 9, p.1.
28. Murchison, p. 505.
29. "The French Building, New York City," Architecture and Building, 59, (October, 1927), 320 and pls. 209-10.
30. Work on the Chanin Building began in 1927 and was completed on January 23, 1929. See the Chanin Building Designation Report, Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP-0993.
31. "Graybar Building," The Architect, 9 (November, 1927), 197-202.
32. H. Douglas Ives. Obituary. New York Times, August 15, 1945. See also Henry F. and Elsie R. Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970), p. 317.
33. John Sloan. Obituary. New York Times, June 26, 1954, p. 13. See also W. Parker Chase, New York, The Wonder City (New York: Wonder City Publishing Co., 1930), p. 113 and Sloan's obituary in the Michigan Society of Architects Monthly Bulletin, 28 (September, 1954), 15.

34. "Pershing Square Building," American Architect, 124 (October 10, 1923), 319-24.
35. Thomas Markoe Robertson. Obituary. New York Times, August 3, 1962, p. 23. See also "Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report" Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981, vol. 2, p. 1326-28, 1346-47.
36. Charles Over Cornelius, "War Memorials," Architectural Record, 47 (January 1920), 41-43.
37. NB518-25.
38. Ibid.
39. NB532-25 (Harriman Building). See also "\$10,000,000 French Project to be Ready March, 1927," Real Estate Record and Guide, July 17, 1926, p. 7.
40. ALT1804-30.
41. A photograph of the 45th Street vestibule was identified as the "Main Entrance" in "Entering the Fred F. French Building," The Voice, 3 (August 1928), 3.
42. "Confidence Justified," The Voice, 2 (January, 1928), 4.
43. "Rapid Progress Made in Construction of 551 Fifth Avenue," The Voice, 1 (July, 1926), 1.
44. Chase, p. 245.
45. "The Origin of the Setback," American Architect, 131 (May 5, 1927), 605.
46. E.A. Park, New Backgrounds for a New Age (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1927), p. 148.
47. George Edgell, The American Architecture of Today (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1928, p. 356.
48. Hugh Ferriss, "The New Architecture: Evolution of a City Building Under the Zoning Law," New York Times, March 19, 1922, sec. 3, p. 8.
49. NB291-22. See also Claude Bragdon, "The Shelton Hotel, New York," Architectural Record, 58 (July 1925), 1-18.
50. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969 [1981]), p. 1186. Cited by John Tauranac, Essential New York (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), p. 155.
51. H. Douglas Ives, "The Architecture of the French Building," The Voice, 1 (February, 1927), 4.
52. Carol Herselle Krinsky, "The Fred F. French Building: Mesopotamia in Manhattan," Antiques, 121 (January 1982), 289-90, pls. IV-VI.

53. Parker Morse Hooper, "Modern Architectural Decoration," Architectural Forum, 48 (Februry, 1927), 4.
54. Ives, p. 4.
55. Krinsky, p. 191.
56. "Setback Buildings Growing in Favor," New York Times, June 24, 1923, sec. 2, p. 6.
57. See, for example, Rose Henderson, "A Primitive Basis for Modern Architecture," Architectural Record, 54 (August, 1923), 189-96 and Marjorie I. Ingle, The Mayan Revival: Art Deco Mayan Fantasy (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), esp. p. 51-56 and "The Origin of the Setback," American Architect, 131 (May 5, 1927), 605-8.
58. Hooper, p. 153-173.
59. NB499-26. See also Leon V. Solon, "The Park Avenue Building, New York City," Architectural Record, 63 (April, 1928), 289-97.
60. Ives, p. 4.



## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Fred F. French 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, New York State, and the nation.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Fred F. French Building is a significant example of skyscraper architecture dating from New York's greatest building boom; that it was an early and creative response to the Building Code of 1916; that its design, noteworthy for the eclectic blend of Near Eastern, Egyptian, ancient Greek and proto-Art Deco influences, represents the stylistic compromise between lingering historicism and the modernistic trends which typified the architecture of the late 1920s; that the Fred F. French Building, a collaborative design by H. Douglas Ives, the French Company's skilled head architect, and Sloan & Robertson, a firm responsible for some of the most distinguished Art Deco skyscrapers in New York, was an important and intentionally conspicuous example of corporate imagery; that it was erected as corporate headquarters for Fred F. French, one of New York's foremost real estate developers in the early decades of the twentieth century, whose work had a lasting impact on New York's residential and commercial development; that the French Building is exceptional for the lavish use of gilt bronze ornament, polychromed murals and faience bas-reliefs; and that the iconographic faience bas-reliefs which crown its roof were a unique contribution to New York's skyline in 1927 and remain so to this day.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Fred F. French Building, 551 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1281, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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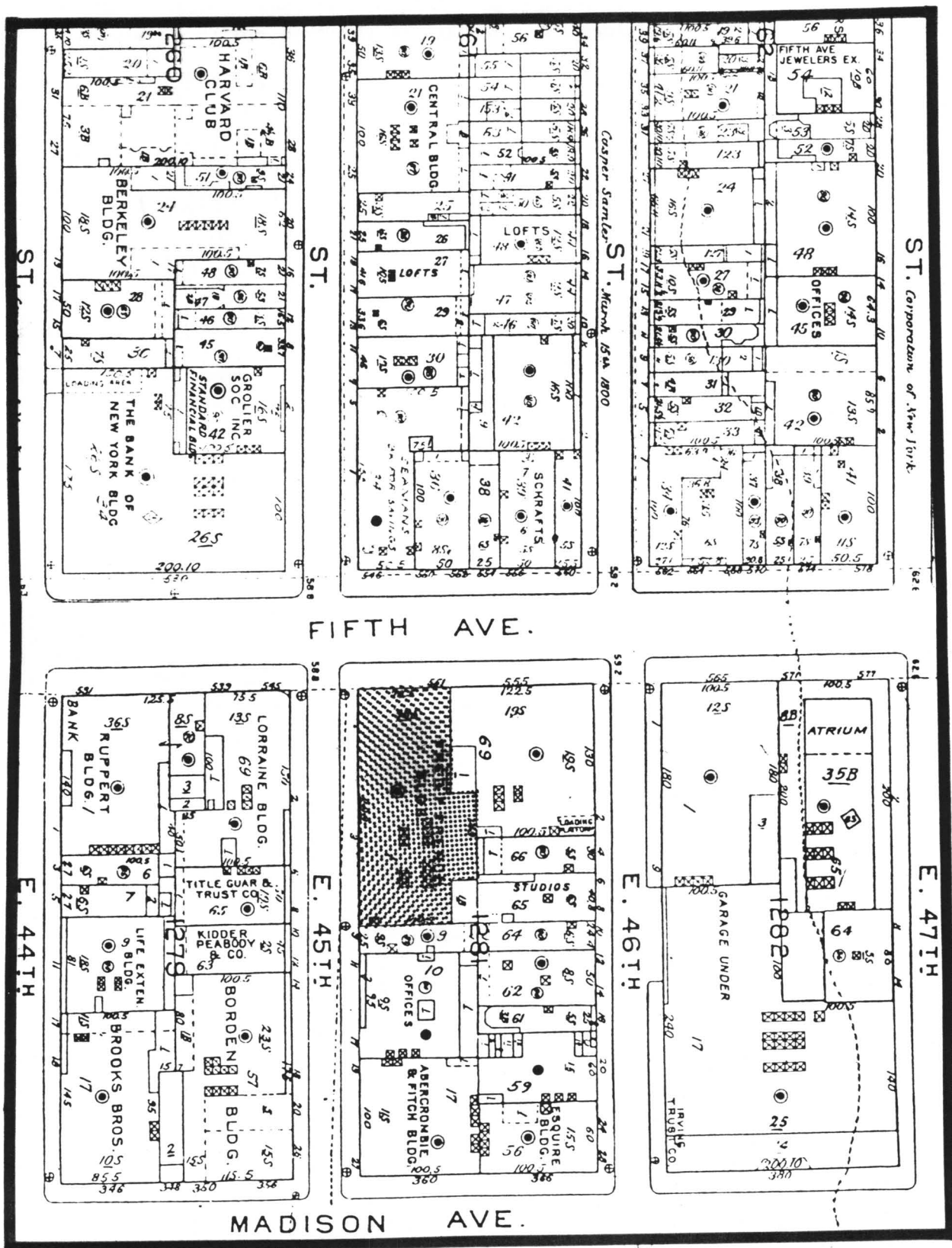
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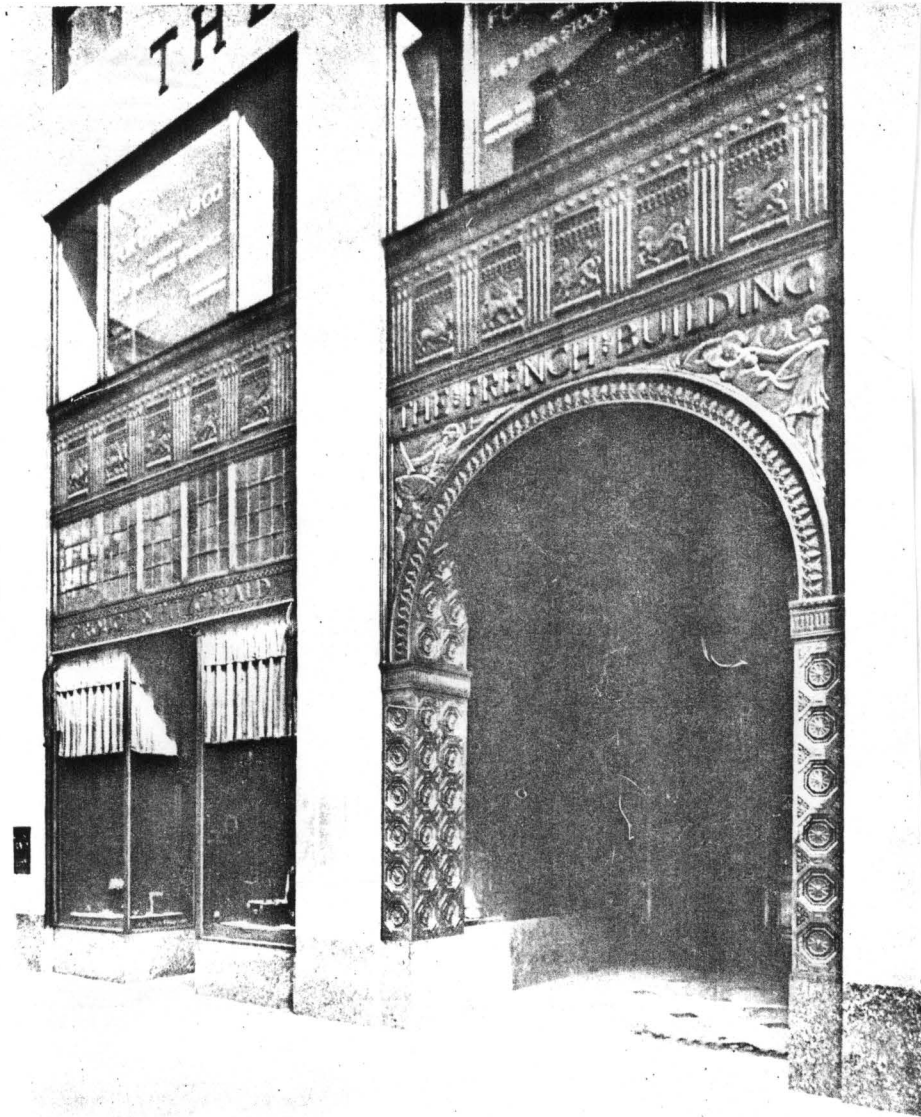
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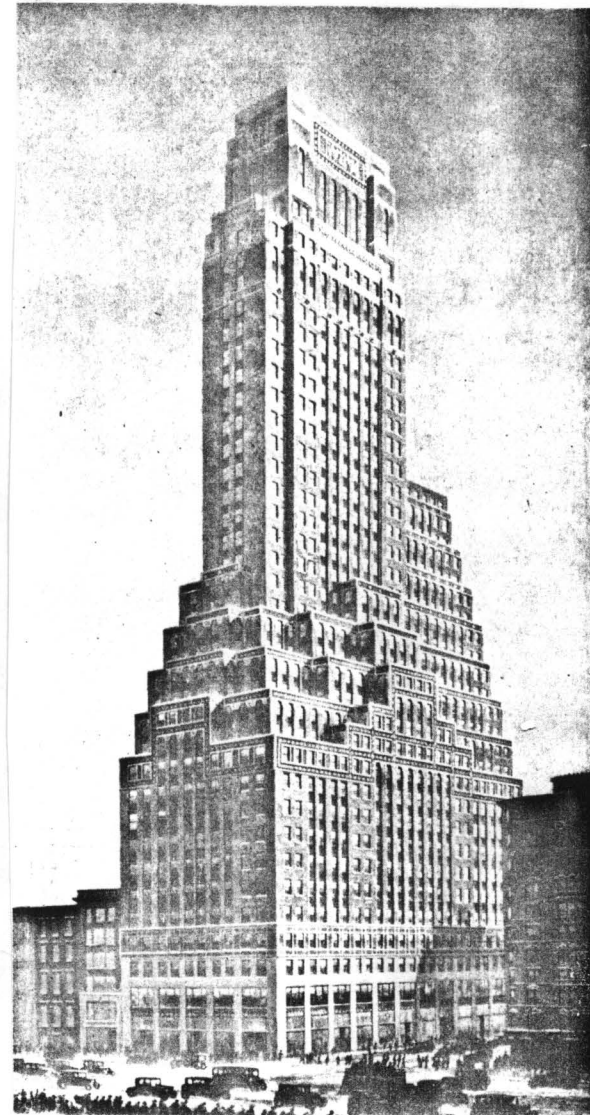




THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



1927 view of 1st & 2nd bays, Fifth Avenue facade  
showing original shopfront configuration  
[Architecture and Building, (October, 1927) pl. 209]



Presentation Drawing, 1926  
[Architecture and Building,  
October, 1927, pl. 209]



Elevated view to the southeast.



Asymmetrical Fifth Avenue Facade

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING

LEFT: Elevated view to the northeast.

BELOW: Ground level view to the northeast.





ABOVE: Elevated view to the southwest.

LEFT: Elevated view to the northwest.

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



Detail: Faience bas-reliefs, tower view to the northeast



Detail: Faience-lined setbacks: eleventh story and above; view to the northeast.



Fifth Avenue Facade

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING





DETAIL: Entrance Arch and Bronze Frieze (Fifth Avenue Facade).

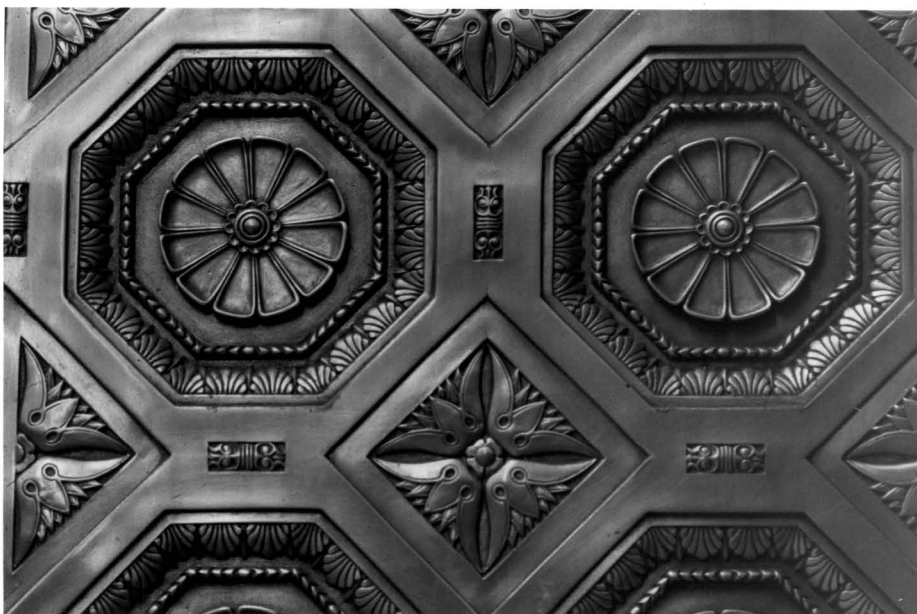
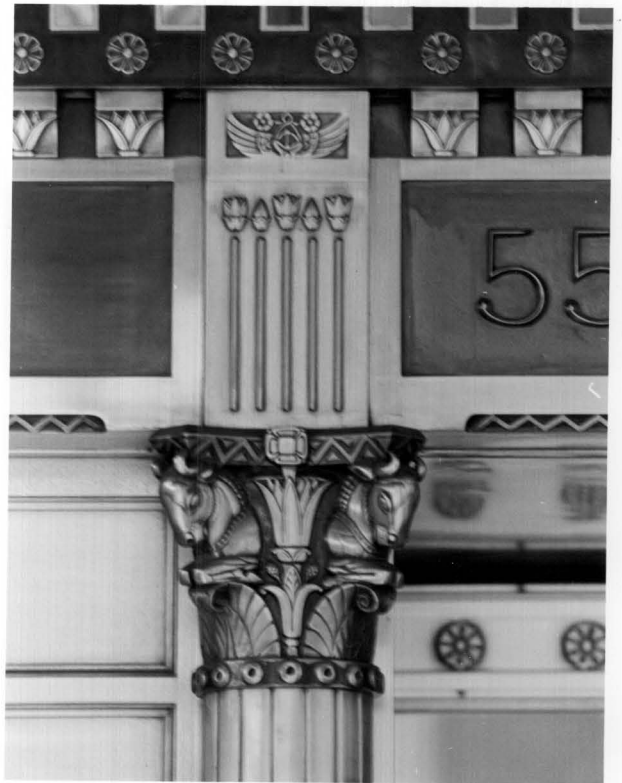
THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



Detail: Outer vestibule, Fifth Avenue

THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



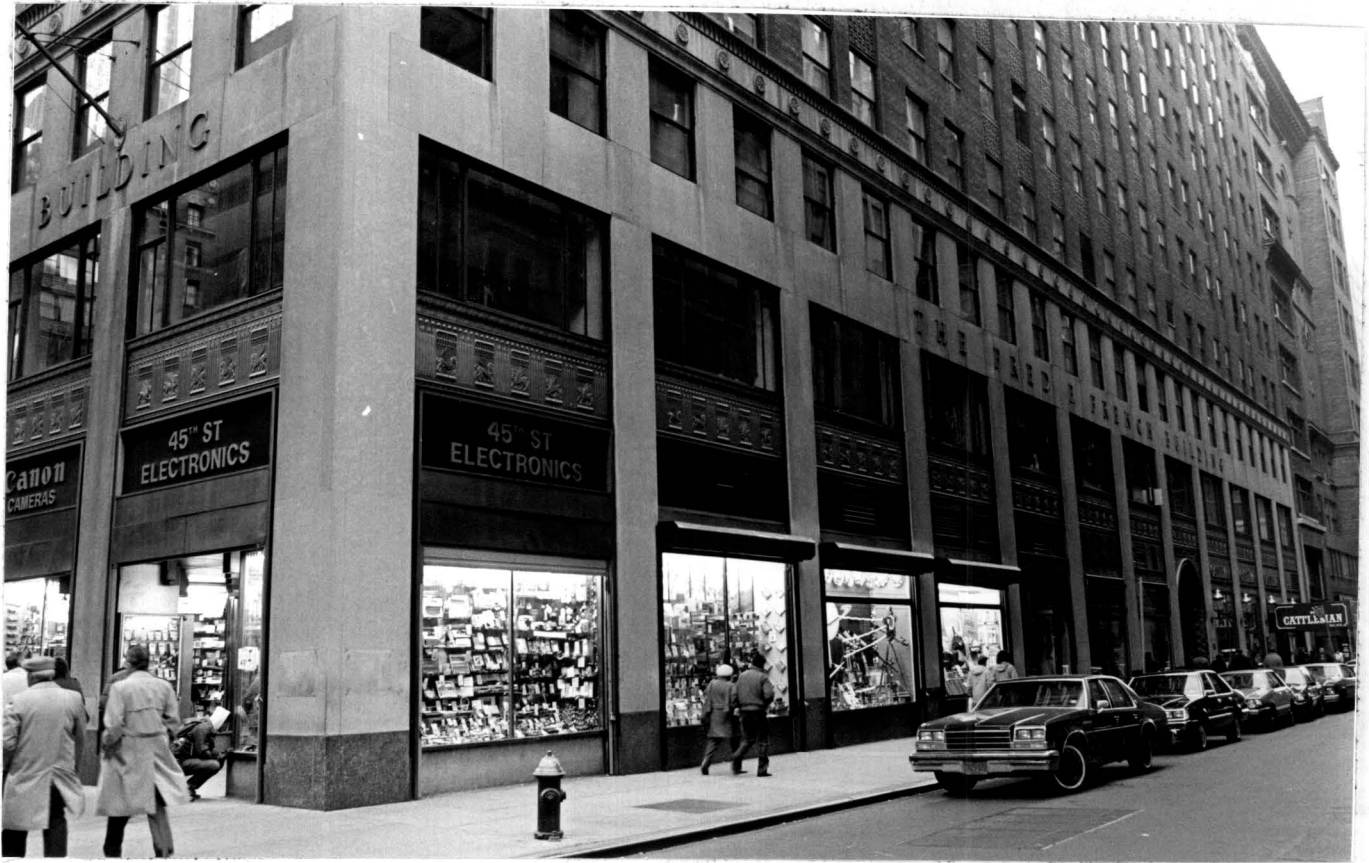
TOP LEFT: Fifth Avenue entrance and outer vestibule.

TOP RIGHT: Protome capital and cornice, outer vestibule (Fifth Avenue).

LEFT: Octagonal coffers, Detail: Fifth Avenue Entrance.



THE FRED F. FRENCH BUILDING



DETAIL: 45th Street Facade (view to the east)



DETAIL: 45th Street Facade (view to the west)