

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 1, 1990; Designation List 225
LP-1581

5 WEST 16th STREET BUILDING, Borough of Manhattan, Built c. 1846. Architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 818, Lot 37.

On June 10, 1986, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 5 West 16th Street Building (Item No. 2); the building was one of twenty-three buildings located from 3 to 59 West 16th Street, each being heard that day as an individual item. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including four witnesses who spoke specifically in regard to 5 West 16th Street, as well as to the related items. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Landmarks Preservation Commission has received seventy-seven letters in support of the designation of the houses on the north side of West 16th Street on the block between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. The owner of the property did not appear at the public hearing but subsequently sent a letter opposing the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The bow-fronted house at No. 5 West 16th Street, constructed c. 1846, serves as a distinctive reminder of the period when this section of Manhattan, near Union Square, was a fashionable neighborhood filled with handsome residences. This brick house with its generous width and elegant curved front is a finely-designed example of the Greek Revival style; the unusual bow front is a feature more commonly found on houses in Boston dating from earlier in the nineteenth century. The eared and battered entrance surround, executed in stone, is a distinguishing architectural feature initially derived from Egyptian sources that was popular in Greek Revival rowhouse designs during the 1840s. This house is one of a group of nine residences (four extant¹) constructed under the terms of a restrictive agreement which governed the use and overall design of the buildings to ensure that this block of West 16th Street would develop as a fine residential street. During the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century the character of the area changed from purely residential to one of mixed commercial and residential use. This house has maintained its simple elegance and residential character, though adapted to meet the commercial requirements of the neighborhood.

Development of the Union Square Neighborhood²

The block of West 16th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues lay within the original boundaries of a farm belonging to Simon Congo, a free black man in seventeenth-century New York. This property was later incorporated into the holdings of the esteemed landowner Henry Brevoort of the Bowery, a New York civic leader. The northernmost tract of the Brevoort farm was sold to Thomas and Samuel Burling in 1799, and in 1825 John Cowman purchased the section of land now roughly bounded by Fifth and Sixth Avenues and West 16th and 17th Streets. The land remained rural into the 1830s, despite the fact that Fifth and Sixth Avenues were opened to traffic in this area a decade earlier.

The development of this and the surrounding blocks was tied to New York's inexorable march northward. The fact that this area became a prime residential neighborhood was due to its proximity to Union Square. Union Place (as Union Square was originally known) located just over one block to the east, appears on the New York City Commissioners Map of 1807-11, which formalized the street grid of Manhattan above Houston Street. It was formed by the unplanned convergence or "union" of the Bowery Road (Fourth Avenue), and Bloomingdale Road (Broadway), and initially extended from 10th to 17th Streets, on land owned by the Manhattan Bank. In 1815, however, the state legislature reduced the size of Union Place by marking the cross-town artery of 14th Street as its southern boundary. The site was at times used as a potters' field, and as late as 1833 was covered with crude shanties. Laid out by attorney and landowner Samuel B. Ruggles, the new Union Place became an integral part of the city plan in the early 1830s to improve vehicular traffic patterns while providing the amenities of a formal park within the expanding city. After the square was cleared, graded, and paved it was formally opened to the public on July 19, 1839, and sometime thereafter became known as Union Square. The perimeter of the square was soon lined with fine residential buildings, a development pattern which gradually spread to the surrounding blocks as well.

The Residential Development of West 16th Street

As older residential districts further downtown declined or were displaced by mercantile development, the Union Square area, then bordering on the city's northernmost urban limits, acted as a magnet for new residential development in the 1840s, and soon became a prosperous neighborhood of mansions and Greek Revival rowhouses.

John Cowman, who owned extensive real estate throughout this area, died in 1832. His will provided that, after a ten year period, his property was to be divided equally among his three children, but only his son Augustus T. Cowman and his son-in-law Edward S. Mesier (widower of John Cowman's daughter Susan) were still living when the terms of the will were carried out in 1842.³ Augustus T. Cowman (1814?-1854) owned a contracting firm in Manhattan and lived in Hyde Park, while Mesier (1803-1854) was a partner in the firm of Mesier & Rich, book publishers and stationery merchants. In 1842, Cowman and Mesier divided the estate of John Cowman, a portion of which extended as far as Union Square. On the north side of West 16th

Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, Augustus Cowman received the lots from No. 23 to the west and Mesier acquired the property to the east. Mesier proceeded to reorganize eleven of the twenty-five foot wide lots into nine lots, each thirty-three feet, four inches wide (lots 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41). He kept the other two twenty-five foot wide lots (lots 23 and 24) for himself and sold the wider lots, accompanied by a restrictive agreement governing the use and overall design features of the buildings to be erected there. They were to be set back "at least six feet from the line of the street...with a swell in the residue of said front wall to extend two feet six inches nearer to the line of the street...." Mesier's requirements concerning use guaranteed that only "first-class" dwellings⁴ would be erected on these sites. This agreement was dated December 18, 1845 (although not recorded until 1847), and signed by Mesier and the owners of the nine lots on West 16th Street.⁵ While the buildings were not yet constructed when this agreement was signed, it seems possible that a design was in existence since the nine houses conformed to the detailed agreement and were identical when constructed, which was shortly thereafter.

The lot containing No. 5 West 16th Street was not officially purchased by Gustavus A. Oppenheim(er), a merchant, until December 23, 1845, but the sale must have been in process since Oppenheim signed the agreement with Mesier. Oppenheim purchased the lot for \$10,000, considerably more than his neighbors paid for their lots several months earlier. It seems that the property had increased in value with specific development plans on hand. Shortly after, in 1846, this house and its eight neighbors were constructed with elegant, curving brick fronts in the fashionable Greek Revival style.

The Development of the Greek Revival Rowhouse⁶

As the city expanded north of 14th Street in the 1830s and 1840s, many blocks were built up with rowhouses constructed in the Greek Revival style. The Greek Revival style was the culmination of an interest in Classical art and antiquities sparked by excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1735 and 1755, the publication of illustrated archeological books such as Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* (1762-1816), and sympathies evoked by the Greek War of Independence with Turkey (1821-24). By the 1820s the Greek Revival style had supplanted the earlier Federal style for a variety of building types, including institutional and civic buildings as well as domestic, and dominated American architecture through the 1840s. Numerous pattern books and builders' guides proliferated in the 1820s and 1830s, notably those of Minard Lafever, which illustrated forms derived from Greek prototypes and helped to disseminate the Greek Revival style. As manifested in the rowhouse, the style is characterized by smooth wall surfaces pierced by large windows, rectangular transoms and flat lintels, a stoop leading to a recessed entrance, a full attic story with a flat roof, and architectural elements self-consciously evoking ancient Greece, such as colonnaded porches, doorways with pediments, and crisp moldings.

An early example of Greek Revival style rowhouses in New York City is the group located at 1 to 13 Washington Square North, built in 1832-33 (in the Greenwich Village Historic District). With the exception of No. 3, remodeled in 1884, these residences retain their original appearance with

minimal alterations. This imposing block is remarkable in its uniformity of design and use of rich, contrasting materials, and may well be considered the prototype for Greek Revival rowhouses in New York City. Like West 16th Street, the Washington Square North block was subject to a restrictive agreement that governed both the appearance and use of the properties.⁷ The Washington Square North and West 16th Street buildings are similar in their uniformity of scale and setback and use of red brick with contrasting stone trim, wrought-iron ornament, and Greek Revival detail.

Another important early example of the Greek Revival style in New York is known as Colonnade Row (1832-33, attributed to Alexander Jackson Davis), at Nos. 428 to 434 Lafayette Street. Originally a row of nine houses, four remain standing (all are designated New York City Landmarks). Like the rows on Washington Square North and West 16th Street, this row creates a harmonious ensemble unified by scale and materials. In Colonnade Row, the houses are unified behind a single monumental facade, a two-story Corinthian colonnade.

The houses on West 16th Street, including No. 5, also display the aesthetic of unity found in the Greek Revival style, utilizing consistent cornice lines, regularly set back building lines, and repetition of building materials and architectural details. Each house in the bow-fronted group is built with three stories above a raised basement, and has a street frontage of thirty-three feet, four inches. Faced in brick with stone trim, each building, in accordance with the agreement, is designed with a swell front which gives a consistent rhythm to the streetscape. The regularity of the square-headed openings and the plain wall surface is enlivened by cast-and-wrought iron railings bordering the stoop and areaway. Greek-inspired details are found in the Corinthian pilasters at the doorway supporting a transom and in the broad, modillioned cornice. The eared and battered entrance surround, executed in stone, is a distinguishing architectural feature initially derived from Egyptian sources that was popular in Greek Revival rowhouse designs in the 1840s.

While the houses at Nos. 5, 7, and 9 West 16th Street display many typical Greek Revival elements, the presence of the bowed front was a fairly unusual occurrence in New York. In addition to this group, there was a row of eight bow-fronted houses on the east side of Union Square between 15th and 16th Streets which was erected by Samuel B. Ruggles in the late 1830s (no longer extant).⁸ In general, however, this was a much more common element in houses in Boston dating from earlier in the century, particularly those designed by Alexander Parris and Charles Bulfinch.

Subsequent History

In a typical Manhattan growth pattern the area surrounding West 16th Street became a business center, leaving this block as a residential enclave between the changing commercial fortunes of the avenues around it. Beginning in the 1860s, the elegant mansions of Union Square were replaced, first by theaters, hotels and luxury retailers, and later by office and loft buildings, and the area came to be known as Ladies' Mile. Later in the

nineteenth century, Sixth Avenue became a shopper's utopia, with the advent of the large department stores. The commercial transformation of the neighborhood left few surviving examples of nineteenth century residential architecture; the block of West 16th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues is one of the few blocks in the area which retains a significant number of such houses.

No. 5 West 16th Street had a fairly stable history until late in the nineteenth century. It served as a single-family dwelling until 1894 when it was adapted for mixed uses. The first and second stories were converted to art and photography studios with living quarters on the top story (Alt. 469, with plans by McKim, Mead & White). The building was sold late in 1911, and further renovations in 1912 resulted in large display windows being installed at the basement and parlor stories (Alt. 1570, with plans by Schwartz & Gross). This storefront, with its molded Ionic pilasters and simple cornice, is harmonious with the overall design and scale of the house and represents the transformation that occurred in the area. The brick-fronted penthouse was added to the building in 1918 (Alt. 1386). While these commercial adaptations were necessary for the building's survival in an area of changing use, the basic configuration of the building has not changed and the residential character in terms of scale, materials and details is still present.

Description

Originally three stories high with a raised basement, No. 5 West 16th Street has a recessed one-story penthouse which was added in 1918 (Alt. 1386). The building is three bays wide, with a swell incorporating the two westernmost bays. The brick facade has been painted grey and the stone trim has been painted tan.

A high stone stoop with wrought-iron railings leads to an entrance in the eastern bay of the parlor story. An eared and battered molded stone enframingent topped by a lintel with a cap molding surrounds the recessed doorway, which has double wooden doors flanked by wooden pilasters and sidelights (now painted), surmounted by a glazed rectangular transom. Non-original lights are attached to the reveals.

Above the entrance, the second and third stories of the eastern bay have tripartite window openings with stone mullions. At the second story these contain the original double-hung, six-over-six, wood-framed sash in the center section, with two-over-two wood-framed sash on each side. The third-story window has the same configuration, with vinyl sash. The second- and third-story windows on the swell also have the original double-hung six-over-six wood-framed sash. All of the windows of the second and third stories have simple stone sills; the moldings have been removed from the stone lintels.

The basement and parlor story of the swell have been altered from the original. A 1912 alteration (Alt. 1570) designed by Schwartz & Gross converted these floors for use as stores with plate-glass show windows. The basement has a modern metal storefront with large windows flanking a central

entrance. A short, broad flight of steps in an open areaway leads to it. Under the stoop is a non-original wooden door, with a small window cut between the storefront and the stoop. The window is deeply recessed and has been fronted by a metal grille. At the parlor story, the wood-framed angled storefront from the 1912 alteration remains. It is composed of three large windows with transoms, a simple cornice, and a wooden, paneled Ionic pilaster at the east. The detail has been removed from the pilaster at the west, which is masked by a rain gutter.

A modillioned wooden cornice with metal flashing caps the third story. Above this, the recessed penthouse has a brick facade with two large, tripartite openings containing one-over-one sash windows.

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NOTES

1. In addition to No. 5, No. 7 (LP-1582, designated May 1, 1990), No. 9 (LP-1583, designated May 1, 1990) and No. 17 (LP-0939, designated Nov. 9, 1976) are also designated New York City Landmarks. Three other houses on this block are also New York City Landmarks, designated May 1, 1990: No. 19 (LP-1585), No. 21 (LP-1586), and No. 23 (LP-1587).
2. Much of the history in this report was adapted from LPC, 17 West 16th Street House Designation Report (LP-0939), (New York, 1976); LPC, The Bank of the Metropolis Designation Report (LP-1537), report prepared by Lisa Koenigsberg (New York, 1988); I.N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909 vol. 5 (New York, 1857), 1808; and Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston, 1976), 165-182.
3. Liber 433, page 118 and page 124.
4. The designation of "first-class" dwelling was used for insurance purposes and pertained to certain standards, such as that the building be occupied as a single-family dwelling and that it have brick masonry

construction.

5. Liber 481, page 601 records the signed agreement. Mesier had rearranged the lot widths by 1844 and began to sell them in that year. Lot 37 was purchased in 1844 by two investors, Thomas Gibbs and George Butler (Liber 445, page 324) and then sold to Thomas Oliver later that same year (Liber 456, page 55). Oliver, in turn sold the lot to the signer of the agreement Gustavus Oppenheim (Liber 468, page 600).
6. See Charles Lockwood, Bricks & Brownstone (New York, 1972), 55-97; Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (1944; rpt. New York, 1964), 119-58; Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown 60-64; LPC, Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report vol. 1 (New York, 1969), 52-59; LPC, 428 Lafayette Street Building Designation Report (New York, 1965).
7. The agreement stipulated that, among other items, the lessee could not erect "a slaughter house, forge...or any manufactory..." and that the lessee must erect "a good and substantial dwelling house...three or more stories high...with the front to be 12 feet back of and parallel with Sixth Street (Washington Square North)..." See LPC, Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report, 53.
8. M. Christine Boyer, Manhattan Manners, (New York, 1985), 47.

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 5 West 16th Street Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 5 West 16th Street Building, constructed c. 1846, serves as a distinctive reminder of the period of the 1840s, when Union Square and the blocks around it were the fashionable residential neighborhood of Manhattan; that this building is one of nine houses built under a restrictive agreement concerning their design and use, which created a visual harmony and sense of elegance still present on the street; that it has a finely-detailed Greek Revival design typical of the period with a generous street frontage and an unusual curving front which was more commonly found on houses in Boston, as well as a distinguishing eared and battered entrance surround which was a popular feature in Greek Revival rowhouse designs of the 1840s; that, although the house was adapted to meet commercial needs as the area changed from purely residential to one of mixed commercial and residential uses, this house has maintained its simple elegance and graceful residential character which recalls the earliest period of development in the neighborhood west of Union Square.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, The Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark 5 West 16th Street Building, 5 West 16th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 818, Lot 37, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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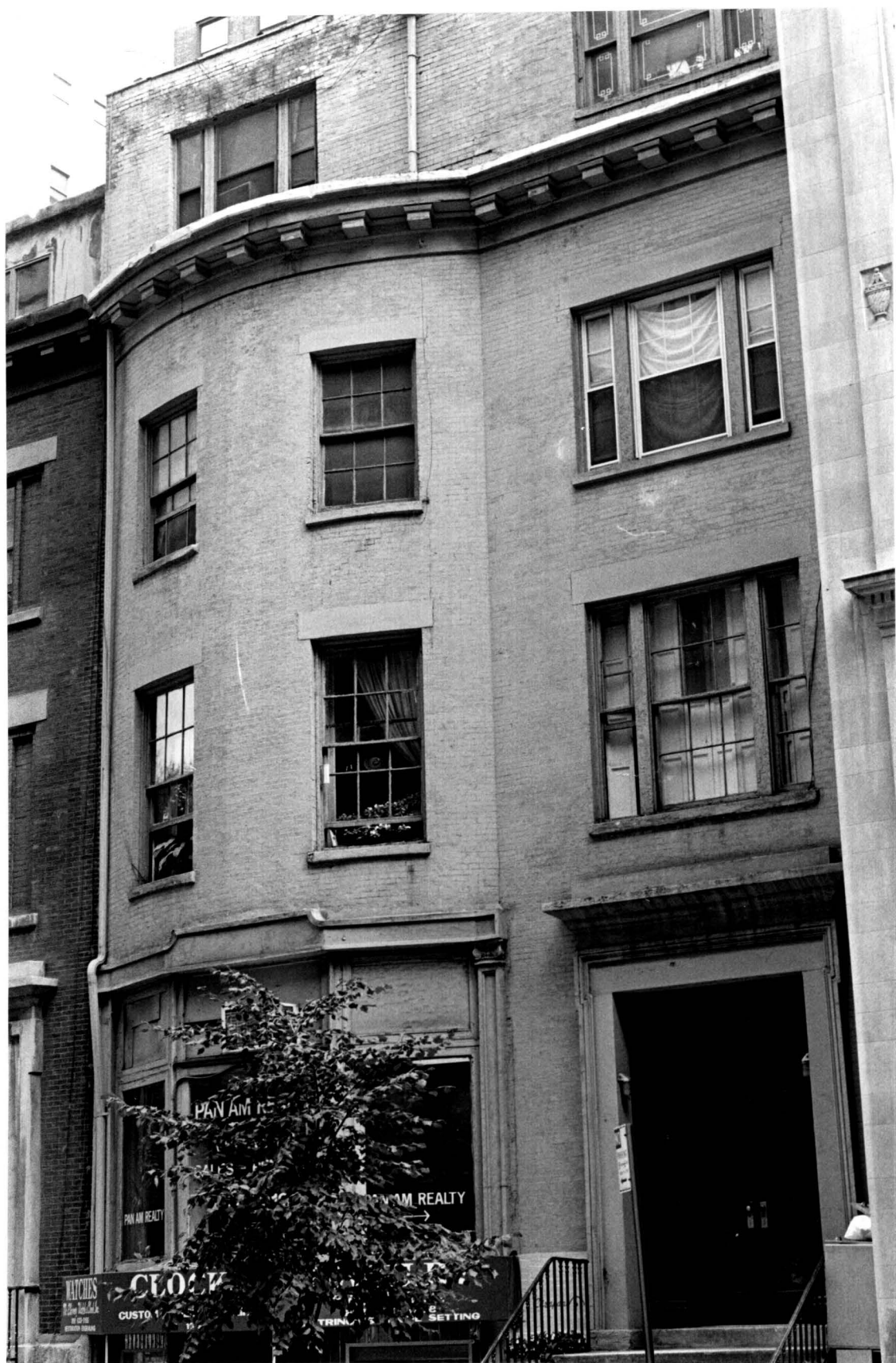
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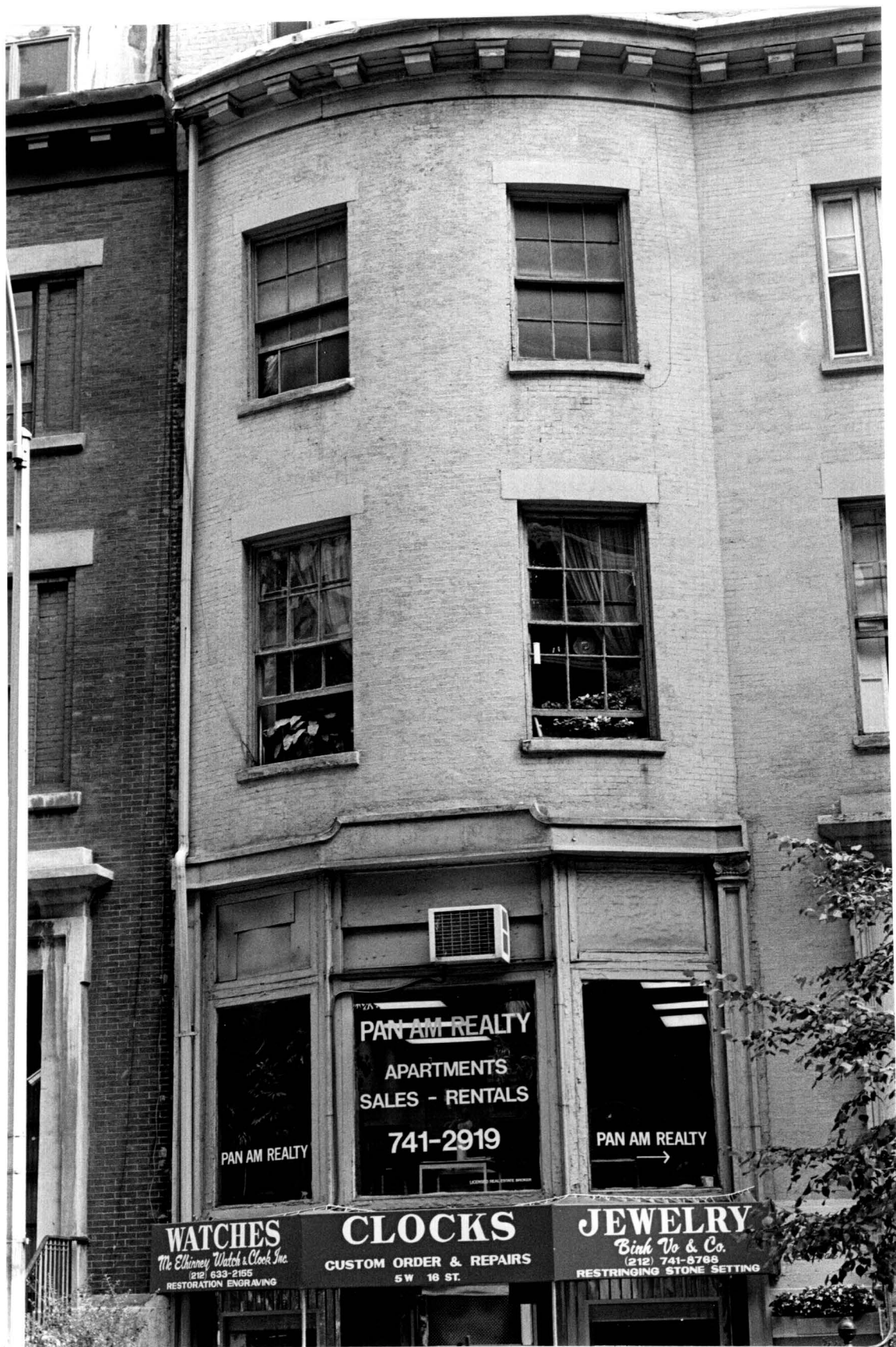
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5 West 16th Street Building, 5 West 16th Street (c. 1846)

Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh



5 West 16th Street Building (storefront detail)

Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh

