

23 WEST 16th STREET BUILDING, Borough of Manhattan, Built c. 1845. Architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 818, Lot 22.

On June 10, 1986, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 23 West 16th Street Building (Item No. 8); 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 two witnesses who spoke specifically in regard to 23 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 between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Located on the north side of West 16th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, No. 23 West 16th Street is a distinctive Greek Revival rowhouse constructed about 1845, at a time when the Union Square area was developing as a fashionable neighborhood. As the city expanded northward in the 1840s, the area west of Union Square and north of 14th Street, then bordering on the city's northernmost urban limits, became a prosperous neighborhood of mansions and fine rowhouses. Characteristic of the Greek Revival style, this brick-fronted house, with its elegant design and proportions, is trimmed in finely detailed stone, ironwork, and wood, exemplified by the original wood door enframingent with its slender Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature and transom above and the richly ornamented iron parlor-story balcony and stoop railing. 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 rowhouse is one of at least six on this block planned and probably built by contractor and amateur architect Augustus T. Cowman. In the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, the area changed in character from residential to one of mixed use, as commercial buildings replaced most of the older rowhouses. Remarkably intact, No. 23 West 16th Street maintains its simple elegance and serves as a significant reminder of the former residential character of the neighborhood to the west of Union Square.¹

The Development of the Union Square Neighborhood²

The site of 23 West 16th Street originally laid within the original boundaries of a farm belonging to Simon Congo, a "free black man" and property owner in seventeenth-century New York. This property was later incorporated into the holdings of 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 the section of land now roughly bounded by Fifth and Sixth Avenues and West 16th and 17th Streets was purchased from them by John Cowman. 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 (later known as Union Square), located a little over one block to the east of 23 West 16th Street, 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. Beginning in the 1860s, Union Square underwent a commercial transformation, first predominated by theaters, hotels and luxury retailers, and later by office and loft buildings.

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. Although Fifth and Sixth Avenues in this area were open to traffic in the 1820s, the land between them remained largely rural through the 1830s, with sporadic development in the early 1840s.

City tax records indicate that a house stood at 23 West 16th Street in 1845, owned by Augustus T. Cowman (1814?-1854). Cowman, a resident of Hyde Park, New York, was the owner of A.T. Cowman & Co., contractors, located at 2 William Street in New York. He was also a vestryman of St. James Church, Hyde Park; between 1844 and 1846 he designed and superintended

the construction of a new Gothic Revival church for the parish, having toured Europe to study ecclesiastical architecture for this project. Cowman was the son of John Cowman (d. 1832), who had acquired much of the north side of West 16th Street by 1825. John Cowman's daughter, Susan Maria, married Edward Sebring Mesier; she died in 1839. Mesier (1803-1854), the descendant of a prominent eighteenth-century family of merchants in New York, was a partner in the firm of Mesier & Rich, book publishers and stationery merchants,³ and the other principal developer of the block. John Cowman's will provided that, after a ten year period, his property was to be divided equally between his three children, but only his son Augustus T. Cowman and his son-in-law Mesier were still living when the will was executed in 1842.⁴ Shortly thereafter, Mesier terminated the trust agreement with his brother-in-law, dividing up the lots and receiving Nos. 1 to 21 West 16th Street while Cowman received Nos. 23 to 31 West 16th Street.⁵ Mesier entered into a restrictive agreement with several prospective property owners on the north side of West 16th Street in December of 1845 to further guide the development of this block. In 1847, the restrictive agreement was recorded, stipulating that the buildings developed on these lots were to be "at least six feet back from the street" and that no "stable, meat shop, slaughter house...or any base commercial establishment" could operate on the effected properties.⁶ The agreement specified the overall design of the houses and ensured that this block would be one of "first-class" private residences.⁷ Cowman, whose property from 23 to 33 West 16th Street was developed by the end of 1845, was not a signatory to this agreement. Perhaps his properties, such as the house at No. 23 West 16th Street, served as models for the further development of the block. Numbers 19 and 21, for example, closely follow the design of 23 West 16th Street in materials, building line setback, scale, and architectural detail.

In 1851 city directories list Dorinthia Phelps, widow of merchant Thaddeus Phelps, as the resident of 23 West 16th Street. The building was part of an initial wave of construction begun about 1845, and residential development continued on the block with another wave of construction in 1857.

The Development of the Greek Revival Rowhouse⁸

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. 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 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. 23, also demonstrate the aesthetic of unity that is found in the Greek Revival style, utilizing consistent cornice lines, regularly setback building lines, and repetition of building materials and architectural details. Like its neighbors, No. 23 is generous in size, being twenty-five feet in width, elegantly proportioned, and ornamented with rich architectural detail that reflects a high quality of workmanship, all of which sets it apart from more modest houses of the period. The regularity of the square-headed openings and plain wall surface is enlivened by ornate cast-and-wrought-iron railings bordering the stoop and areaway and fronting the tall parlor-story windows as a narrow balcony. Greek-inspired details are found in the Corinthian pilasters at the doorway supporting an entablature, in the broad modillioned cornice, and in the eared and battered stone entrance surround, a distinguishing architectural feature initially derived from Egyptian sources which was a popular element of the Greek Revival style in the 1840s.

Description

This four-story Greek Revival rowhouse is located in the middle of the block and extends twenty-five feet along the north side of West 16th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Faced in brick with stone, wood, and wrought-iron ornament, the building retains much of its original appearance.

Faced in lightly rusticated stone, the basement is fronted by an areaway paved in concrete with open garden space which is enclosed by an iron picket-style fence. Underneath the original stone stoop which has the

original iron railing and newel post on the east side (and a modern railing to the west) is an entryway containing a non-historic iron grille door. To the east of the stoop are two window openings covered in iron grilles matching this door. Surmounting the stoop at the parlor story is the recessed entrance flanked by wood Corinthian pilasters (painted white), in turn flanked by three-pane sidelights, supporting a wood entablature capped by a transom containing three panes. The wood door (painted black), which appears to be original, is composed of six panels. The entrance is framed by a projecting eared surround of stone which is slightly battered in a manner inspired by the Egyptian Revival style. Two lanterns have been attached to the masonry. The remainder of the parlor story contains two openings, each with paired six-pane casement doors with transoms opening onto a continuous iron balcony (painted white) on slender supports rising from the areaway. The ironwork is ornamented with a Greek key, wheels, and abstract geometric motifs. The window openings are capped by projecting molded stone lintels (painted white). An opening for an air conditioner has been cut into the brick between the two eastern openings at the parlor story. The second story contains three smaller window openings with six-over-six wood sash and slightly projecting stone sills and lintels; hardware for shutters is still in place. The third-story windows are smaller and continue the pattern seen at the second story; paired four-pane casement windows replace the original six-over-six sash in the western bay. The building is surmounted by a projecting wooden box cornice ornamented with raised diamonds. The fascia board is punctuated by three single-pane attic windows flanked by diamond-shaped panels. An opening for an air conditioner has been cut into the facade below the eastern attic window.

Subsequent History

During the late-nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, the character of the neighborhood, which had come to be known as Ladies' Mile, changed from purely residential to one of mixed commercial and residential use. 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. The block continued to be primarily residential through the end of the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century some of the houses were replaced by commercial and institutional buildings. In 1907 No. 23 West 16th Street housed a business, with a show window installed at the basement level (now removed). In 1952 the building was converted to a multiple dwelling and it continues in use as apartments today. Remarkably intact, No. 23 West 16th Street maintains its simple elegance and residential character and recalls the earliest period of development in the neighborhood west of Union Square.

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NOTES

1. In addition to No. 23, No. 5 (LP-1581, designated May 1, 1990), No. 7 (LP-1582, designated May 1, 1990), No. 9 (LP-1583, designated May 1, 1990), No. 17 (LP-0939, designated Nov. 9, 1976), No. 19 (LP-1585, designated May 1, 1990), and No. 21 (LP-1586, designated May 1, 1990) are all designated New York City Landmarks.
2. This account of the development of Union Square is based on Landmarks Preservation Commission, 17 West 16th Street House Designation Report, (New York, 1976), 1; LPC, The Bank of the Metropolis Designation Report, report prepared by Lisa Koenigsberg (New York, 1988), 1,2; I.N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909 vol. 5 (New York, 1857), 1808; and a general account of this development may be found in Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston, 1976), 165-182.
3. Walter Barrett, Old Merchants of New York City, vol. 1 (New York, 1864), 443, 448.
4. Liber 433, page 118 and page 124.
5. Christopher Gray, "7 West 16th Street," (typescript in the local history collection of the New York Public Library, 1982), unpaginated [1,2].
6. Although most of the lots, including 23 West 16th Street, were twenty-five feet wide, the agreement also provided for nine lots thirty-three-and-one-third feet wide with a "swelled front to extend two feet six inches nearer to the line of the street." See New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, 1847, Liber 481, Page 601.
7. 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.
8. 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).

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 23 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 23 West 16th Street Building is a distinctive surviving Greek Revival rowhouse constructed about 1845, at a time when the Union Square area was developing as a fashionable neighborhood; that, characteristic of the Greek Revival style, this brick-fronted house, with its elegant design and proportions, is trimmed in finely detailed stone, ironwork, and wood, exemplified by the original wood door enframingent with its slender Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature and transom above and the richly ornamented iron parlor-story balcony and stoop railing; that the eared and battered entrance surround, executed in stone, is a distinguishing feature initially derived from Egyptian sources that was popular in Greek Revival rowhouse designs during the 1840s; that it was planned and probably built by contractor and amateur architect Augustus T. Cowman as one of a series of fine rowhouses on West 16th Street; and that, remarkably intact, it maintains its simple elegance and serves as a significant reminder of the former residential character of the neighborhood to the west of Union Square.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 31, 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 the 23 West 16th Street Building, 23 West 16th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 818, Lot 22, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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23 West 16th Street Building, 23 West 16th Street (c. 1845)
Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh



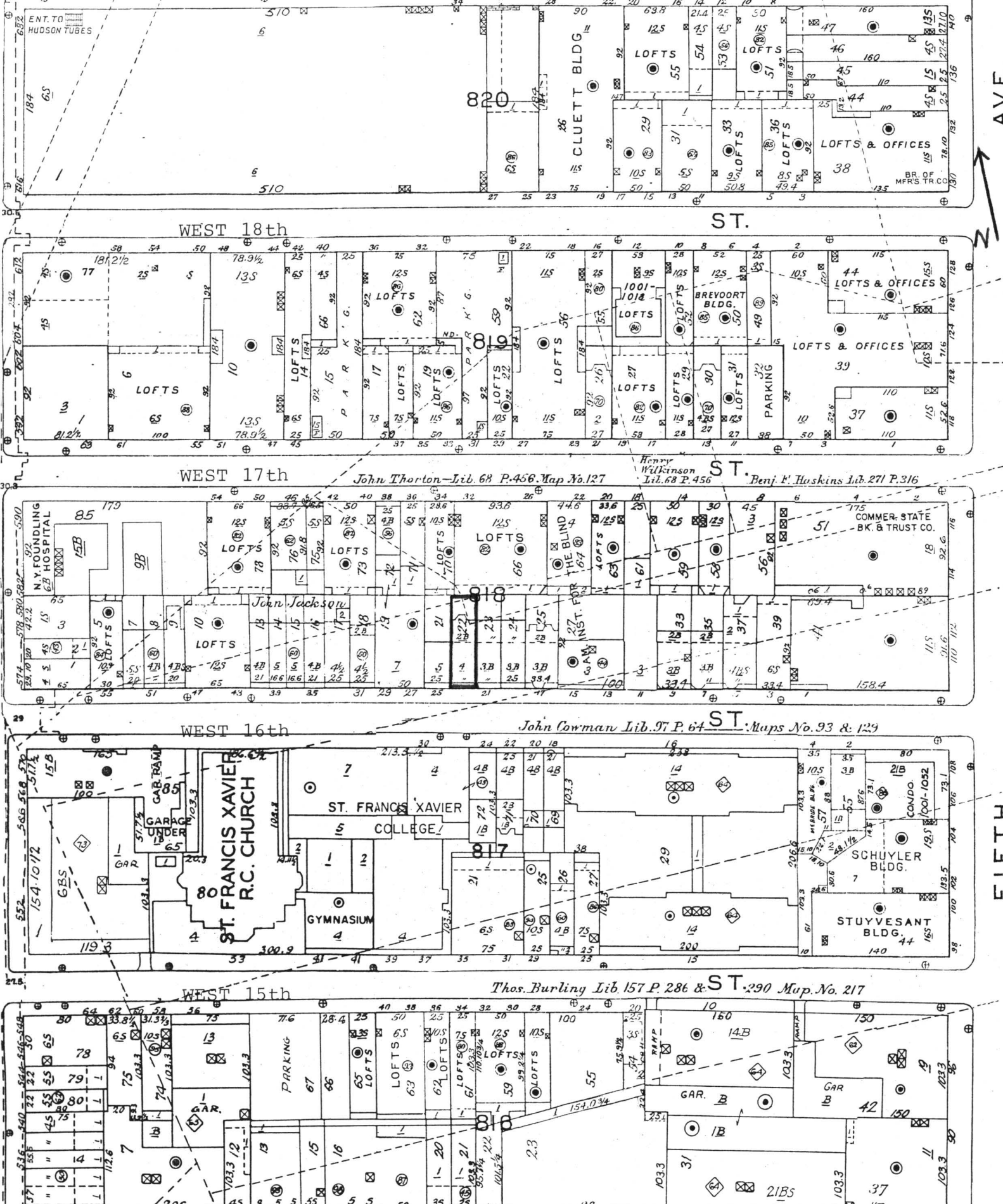
23 West 16th Street Building (ironwork detail)
Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh



23 West 16th Street Building (entrance detail)
Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh



23 West 16th Street Building (facade detail)
Photo Credit: Kevin McHugh



23 West 16th Street Building, 23 West 16th Street (Landmark Site)

Credit: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1989-90