

160 EAST 92nd STREET HOUSE, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1852-53.
Attributed to Albro Howell, carpenter-builder.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1520, Lot 45.

On September 15, 1987, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 160 East 92nd Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation; there were ten speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

A rare surviving remnant of the early years of the village of Yorkville, the 160 East 92nd Street House (1852-53) is a two-and-a-half-story vernacular clapboard dwelling which displays elements of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles. One of the oldest of the few intact nineteenth-century wooden houses which remain in Manhattan north of Greenwich Village, it dates from a period in which many of the houses on the outskirts of the city were of frame construction (prior to the implementation of an overall ban in Manhattan, due to fire hazards). It was probably built by Albro Howell, a carpenter-builder who lived next door and was active in developing the block. The four fluted Corinthian columns of the front porch are c. 1929-31 replacements, reminiscent of the originals. Owned by the prominent Straight family from 1914 to 1942, the house served as living quarters for their staff.

Yorkville

The community of Yorkville, in the vicinity of present-day Third Avenue and East 86th Street, had its beginnings as a small village along the Boston Post Road. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were working farms here, as well as the estates of many prominent New York families along the nearby riverfront. A ferry, established in 1801 to cross the East River to Astoria, had its Manhattan terminus at 86th Street. The rapid growth of Yorkville was noted in 1826 by the New York Evening Post:

The 3rd Avenue passes through the village. Twelve months ago there were not more than two or three buildings on the barren rock, where there are now upwards of sixty, some of them built in a good substantial manner of brick... There are already several extensive factories established in the village.¹

A major boost to the area was the creation in 1834 of a railroad station in Yorkville, at 86th Street and Fourth (Park) Avenue, by the New York & Harlem Railroad, which had been incorporated in 1831 as Manhattan's first railway. Horsecar lines ran along Second and Third Avenues by 1858; these were followed by elevated railway lines in 1877-80.

Many Irish immigrants, who participated in the construction of Central Park and the transportation lines, settled in Yorkville. Several periods of German immigration also helped to establish the character of the neighborhood; employment was provided by three breweries² and their associated businesses (coopers, bottlers, etc.), and by the Steinway Piano Factory across the river in Astoria.

As late as 1880, the majority of houses in the vicinity of 160 East 92nd Street were of frame construction.³ As development of the Upper East Side pushed northward in the 1880s-90s, masonry rowhouses and tenements filled in the lots between the older frame buildings, and eventually replaced most of them. The area north of 91st Street and east of Madison Avenue was not generally favored by the wealthy for their residences, due in large part to the industries, transportation lines, and working class character of much of Yorkville. A number of frame structures, such as 160 East 92nd Street, managed to survive as evidence of Yorkville's earlier days.

Frame Houses in Manhattan

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, wooden buildings were erected in Manhattan. Since they were most vulnerable to fire, however, laws enacted as early as 1761 forbade frame construction in certain areas of the island. As the city developed northward and the density increased, the "fire limits" were continually extended, so that new frame buildings were constructed only in the outer regions. At the time 160 East 92nd Street was built, the fire limits reached only as far north as 32nd Street; in 1866 the limits were extended to 86th Street, then in 1887 to 155th Street.⁴

Frame houses were particularly susceptible to demolition for redevelopment, and were often considered a potential blight on a neighborhood. The Inspector of Buildings in 1871 reported that:

...men of moderate means build wooden houses in the sparsely settled districts of the present, which, in the progress of the future, become obnoxious to the conditions which deprecate property values, retard the progress of better improvements and at all times and under all circumstances increase, immeasurably, the fire risks of a city.⁵

Relatively few frame houses have survived intact in Manhattan. The majority of wooden buildings have been altered, most often by the removal of detailing and/or the application of various surface coverings. 160 East 92nd Street is one of the oldest of the few intact nineteenth-century frame houses in Manhattan north of Greenwich Village.

Manhattan has three significant early wooden residences of the

Georgian-Federal period (all designated New York City Landmarks): the Morris-Jumel Mansion (1765-66, 1810), Gracie Mansion (1799-1801, 1810), and Hamilton Grange (1801, John McComb, Jr.). The Greenwich Village-Chelsea area has the largest concentration of frame structures, dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, but the majority of these are rowhouses in the Federal and Greek Revival styles which have front elevations that are faced with brick. The finest example of an intact clapboard structure in the Village is the three-story vernacular Greek Revival-Italianate style house at 17 Grove Street (1822,1870).

Very few frame structures survive in the entire section of Manhattan between 23rd Street and Harlem. The Upper West Side has only one, 2641 Broadway (at 100th Street, 1871), an Italianate style residential-commercial building (now partially altered on the lower stories). Aside from 160 East 92nd Street (1852-53), there are six frame houses of note on the East Side. In Murray Hill, 203 East 29th Street (early nineteenth century, extensively restored 1981) is a four-story vernacular structure with gambrel roof. 312 and 314 East 53rd Street (1866) are similar two-story vernacular Italianate style houses with dormered mansard roofs; (312 is a designated New York City Landmark, while 314 has aluminum siding). 120 and 122 East 92nd Street (1871 and 1859, both designated New York City Landmarks) are also adjacent Italianate style dwellings, but three stories in height, with front porches; 122 (possibly by Albro Howell as suggested by the cornice) has segmental-arched windows, while 120 has modillioned lintels. Also nearby in Yorkville is 128 East 93rd Street (c. 1868), a Second Empire style house with a dormered mansard roof (and ground floor alterations).

Of the surviving frame houses in Harlem, the most significant are 17 East 128th Street (c. 1864, a designated New York City Landmark), another Second Empire style house, and the two facing rows of ten Italianate style houses each, which comprise Sylvan Terrace (1882, G. Robinson, Jr.), now included in the Jumel Terrace Historic District.

160 East 92nd Street House

In 1849 the majority of the lots on the south side of East 92nd Street, between Third and Fourth (Park) Avenues, were purchased by Albro Howell.⁶ Howell, listed in New York City directories as a carpenter from 1835 to 1881, was also intermittently listed as a builder after 1852. During his entire career he maintained an office downtown (first on Beekman Street, later on Cliff Street). He also lived downtown until 1851, when he moved to Yorkville, apparently building a house for himself at 166 East 92nd Street. During the brief period he lived there (until 1854), he sold many of his lots, and it is logical to assume that the houses that went up soon after were his work. He undoubtedly built other houses in the neighborhood as well. Howell lived in Greenwich Village from 1855 to 1871 and on East 46th Street from 1872 to 1894, after which he no longer was listed in the directories. He maintained an involvement with East 92nd Street properties until 1870.

In May 1852, lots 44 and 45 on East 92nd Street were sold by Howell to Robert N. Hebbard,⁷ with a covenant against establishing any "trade or business which may be offensive or noxious to the neighboring

inhabitants,"⁸ such as stable, brewery, or slaughtering house. Heberd was listed in the 1853 directory as a bookkeeper, and later as selling mirrors. His sons were clerks in the 1850s; Gilbert C. Heberd was later superintendent of the Downtown Relief Bureau (c. 1882-1914), and William E. Heberd was a founder of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor.

The two-and-a-half-story clapboard house was constructed at 160 East 92nd Street, most probably by Albro Howell, by the time of the 1853 tax assessments; Robert Heberd was also listed as living on East 92nd Street in that year's directory. The design combined elements of the vernacular Greek Revival and Italianate styles.

In 1858 the Heberd family built another house next door on its other lot at 162 East 92nd Street. The 160 East 92nd Street House was sold in 1864. The next long term owner (1878-1904) was a John T. Rosekrans, who was followed by Henry Grenhart, a bottler.⁹ In 1914 the property was purchased by Willard Dickerman Straight and his wife, the former Dorothy Payne Whitney.¹⁰ Respectively a diplomat-financier and a philanthropist-social activist, together they founded the weekly journal The New Republic that same year. Residing at 1130 Fifth Avenue (1913-15, Delano & Aldrich, a designated New York City Landmark) on the corner of 94th Street, the Straights constructed a garage next door to 160 East 92nd Street, at 162 (1916, Delano & Aldrich), and used the two buildings as living quarters for their staff. After Mr. Straight's death in 1918 and Mrs. Straight's remarriage and move to England in 1925, the house was deeded to the Straight Improvement Company, the real estate management firm for the Straight estate. Staff continued to live there until the building was sold in 1942. Another notable owner (1956-76) was Jean Schlumberger,¹¹ an internationally prominent jewelry designer who maintained a salon at Tiffany & Co. from 1956 until his death in 1987.

Description¹²

The 160 East 92nd Street House is a two-and-a-half-story (wood) clapboard house with elements of the vernacular Greek Revival and Italianate styles. The house is situated on a lot approximately 25 x 101 feet. The main 2-1/2-story portion of the house is 22 x 30 feet with a front porch (22 x 6 feet) and two rear wings extending along the western property line: a two-story frame wing (12 x 28 feet) is probably contemporary with the front portion; a one-story polygonal concrete block addition (14-1/2 x 11 feet), sheathed with clapboard, was built in 1956. The overall length of the house is 82-1/2 feet.

The entrance has a simple molded surround with a slightly projecting molded lintel, a two-pane transom, molded reveals, and double wood doors with rectangular upper and square lower panels [1930s photographs show the upper ones as glazed]. The windows on the first and second floors have simple molded surrounds with projecting molded lintels and shutters (paneled on the first floor and louvered above); the current inappropriate single-pane and casement sash (1980s) replaced 2-over-4 wood sash. The attic story has simple molded surrounds, two-pane wood sash, and louvered shutters. The molded cornice has dentils, scroll brackets, and a plain frieze with end contours similar to the brackets. A tall brick chimney with chimney pots is located at the east end of the roof.

The one-story porch has a flat roof with a molded cornice, wood plank floor and ceiling, and four wood fluted Corinthian columns with molded bases set on plinths. The porch was modified c. 1929-31, at the time of the construction of the adjacent Young Men's Hebrew Association building;¹³ the cornice profile was somewhat modified, with dentils removed, and the current columns replaced fluted columns with "Tower of the Winds" capitals.¹⁴ The alley wall and entrance (probably built c. 1916) have been altered. The east (alley) elevation of the house, visible from the sidewalk, is clapboard. The roof has a very slight peak, as seen from the side.

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NOTES

1. New York Evening Post, Sept. 13, 1826, cited in The Iconography of Manhattan Island, vol. 5, I. N. Phelps Stokes (New York, 1926), 1662.
2. Yorkville's three breweries were located one block to the east of the 160 East 92nd Street House: George Ehret's Hell Gate Lager Bier Brewery (1866); Jacob Ruppert Brewery; and George Ringler Brewery.
3. Atlas of the Twelfth Ward, City of New York (New York, 1880).
4. Mary B. Dierickx, Manhattan's Wooden Buildings (New York, 1976), 19-23.
5. Annual Report (1871), New York City Department of Buildings, cited in Dierickx, 15.
6. This was formerly a continuous block; Lexington Avenue was cut through the block in 1869. The information on Albro Howell was compiled from the following sources: New York City Directories, 1835-94; New York City, Twelfth Ward Tax Assessment Records, 1849-70; New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances.
7. The information on the Heberd family was compiled from the following sources: New York City Directories, 1853-60; New York City, Twelfth Ward Tax Assessment Records, 1853-70; New York County; and Gilbert C. Heberd obituary, New York Times, Apr. 28, 1914, p. 13.
8. New York County, ibid., Mar. 22, 1852, liber 593, 570.
9. New York City Directories, 1878-1914; New York County.
10. The information on Dorothy and Willard Straight was compiled from the following sources: Dorothy [Straight] Elmhirst obituary, NYT, Dec. 16, 1968, p. 50; LPC, National Audubon Society (Willard Straight House) Designation Report (New York, 1968); "Willard D. Straight," Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 9 (New York, 1964), 121-122; and New York County.

11. New York County; Jean Schlumberger obituary, NYT, Sept. 1, 1987, p. B6.
12. For a complete listing of alterations and conditions at the time of designation, please consult: 160 East 92nd Street House Designation File, Research Department, LPC.
13. Young Men's Hebrew Association, Photograph Collection; Museum of the City of New York, Von Urban Photograph Collection.
14. This column is a variant of the Corinthian order, derived from the Tower of the Winds in Athens, published in Antiquities of Athens (1762), by Stuart and Revett.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 160 East 92nd Street House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 160 East 92nd Street House is a two-and-a-half-story vernacular clapboard dwelling of 1852-53 which displays elements of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles; that it represents the tradition of the carpenter-builder in New York City, and was probably the work of Albro Howell, who was active in developing the block; that it is a rare and early surviving remnant of the village of Yorkville on today's Upper East Side; that it is one of the oldest of the few intact nineteenth-century frame houses remaining in Manhattan north of Greenwich Village; that it is a good example of a modest wooden dwelling from a period in which many of the houses built on the outskirts of the city were of frame construction; that the building had several prominent owners and served as living quarters for staff of the Willard D. Straight family; and that its front porch, though modified c. 1929-31, is reminiscent of the original, with its four fluted Corinthian columns.

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 the 160 East 92nd Street House, 160 East 92nd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1520, Lot 45, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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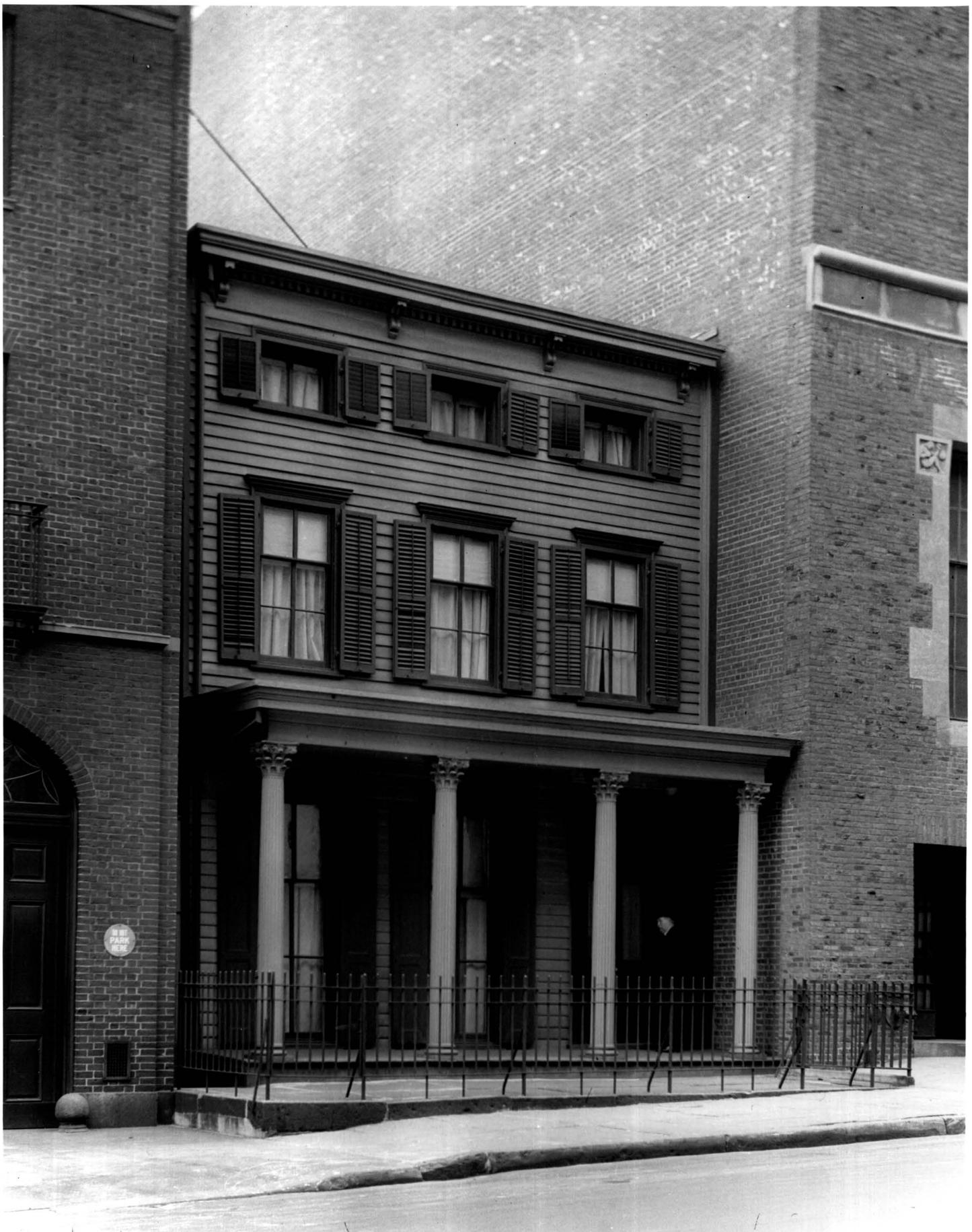
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Young Men's Hebrew Association. Photograph Collection.



160 East 92nd Street House
Built: 1852-53
Attributed to Albro Howell

Photo Credit: LPC



160 East 92nd Street House (1932)

Photo Credit: Museum of the City of
New York



160 East 92nd Street House (1929)
with original columns of porch

Photo Credit: Young Men's Hebrew
Association